

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

10¢

SEPTEMBER



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!

FEATURE NOVEL

- **BARB WIRE MEANS GUNSMOKE**

by TOM ROAN

TWO NOVELETTES

- **BULLET MUSKETEERS**

by TOM W. BLACKBURN

- **THE DEVIL'S CLAW**

by R. S. LERCH

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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PUBLISHED
SEPTEMBER 10TH

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SEPTEMBER, 1943

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THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU



AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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FUR-MAN'S ULTIMATUM!

MAX BRENNER wasn't a big man and didn't look dangerous. He lacked the full-bodied strength and the weather-cured, woods wise features of a fur man. The whole of Rainbow Basin—that last and greatest gathering place and hunting ground of the trade—knew vaguely that Brenner had been ostensibly working an area about his cabin at Center Rock, in the middle of the basin, for two seasons past. . . . But there wasn't a man in the trapper legion—*save those Max Brenner had quietly pressed into his treacherous service*—who could see anything in Brenner save a sharp-featured little outlander, too clumsy in working his lines to even be reckoned a competitor.

Even Gene Sabin, like the others, had come into this rendezvous at Whetstone with such a measurement of Max Brenner.

Most of the fur-man legion at the rendezvous was hunkered in a long-haired, watchful circle back of the big fire. For more than an hour they sat motionless while Max Brenner talked to them. And Max Brenner did *all* of the talking. The fur-men sat and watched him coolly parade the strength he had quietly and treacherously mustered. There was a lethal company of sixty Athabaskan warriors, grimly minus the paint and gear of a tribal war party—but armed with gleaming, rifle-barreled, cap-and-ball guns. There were renegades, merciless, unprincipled thieves that the fur-man legion had disowned and kicked out of the company. And there were a scattered score of the weaklings—small trappers who fared badly alone, but who made a counting force in Max Brenner's outlaw union.

Gene Sabin watched Sherwood Nichols at the council. Where Nichols went, the rest of the legion would follow. It was obvious for what reason Max Brenner had built his armed force and why he chose now to parade his might at the rendezvous—with the full force of surprise behind them. He was out to control the basin and its trade. He said as much, blandly, and named a boundary across the basin, one side of which was to be his to control, the remainder to be left to Nichols-Royal, Nationale Pelleterie, Rostow and Thed-

dar. It was a big, cool, completely bold steal. Openly so.

There was resentment, much of it, about the fire. But every man in the legion knew that he lived by producing pelts—and that war would ruin them all. Nichols, great-headed and troubled, held silent through Brenner's parade and his smug demands. When the flinty-eyed little man was finished, Nichols came slowly to his feet.

"Nichols-Royal has never wanted more than its share of the trade of this or any other basin," he said. "Brenner, you claim to be taking over for protection of the rights of the little independent trappers. Those rights have never been in danger here. But the peace of the Rainbow means more to my company than a few thousand furs a season. If it means protecting the little man, Nichols-Royal is ready to agree to the boundaries you have set."

Then the burly Theddar heaved to his feet. "Nichols goes a little too far!" he protested. "One valley we have always trapped from my post lies inside your boundary, Brenner. I don't want trouble, either. Share that valley with you I will do. But give it up, no!"

Brenner shrugged at that, knowing that his armed and trained gun-wolves could swallow Theddar in the twinkling of an eye.

Big, bear-like Mike Rostow growled angrily. "I'm outside your boundary. But if you move it again, you'll have it in my territory. Don't do that, Brenner. Let me trap and I'll trap. Make me fight—and by hell—I'll fight!"

Max Brenner stood up and grinned.

For Max Brenner could afford to grin. Like a campaigning general he had planned every move far in advance. And his big surprise was about to be sprung. . . .

The absorbing, colorful story of these rough-and-ready, fighting fur-men will be told in the next issue, as only Tom W. Blackburn can tell a highly dramatic yarn of the Northwest. He calls it "The Fur Rebellion." This and nine other first-string Western stories will be in the big October 10 STORY WESTERN—out September 10th!

THE EDITOR.

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BARBWIRE MEANS GUNSMOKE

By TOM ROAN

Action-Packed Novel of the Wild Frontier



CHAPTER ONE

Gunfire and Dogs

IT WAS risky business, doomed by almost certainty to end somewhere in sudden gunfire and bloodshed. But that cool Friday night was ideal for it. Only pale light came from the weak half-moon still hanging just above the dark hills walling the western side of the great valley and the white-fanged peaks of the bold black mountain chains beyond them.

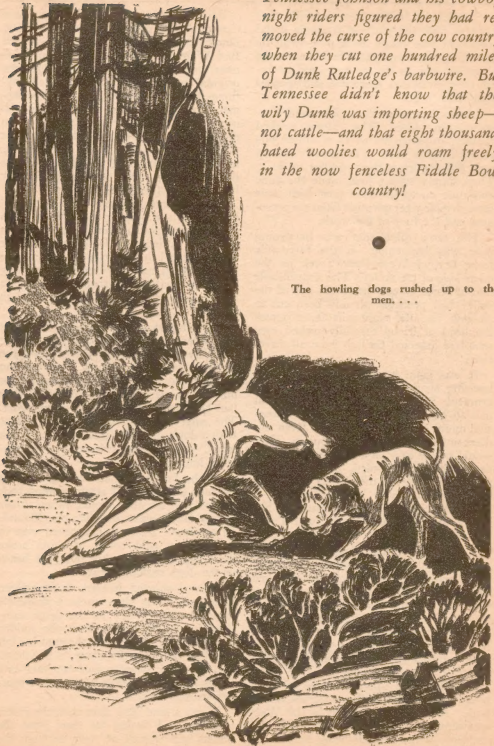
Dawn was not far away, and the strung-out men working their way down the

whispering creek on the eastern side of the valley were trying to finish their job as quickly and silently as they could in order to make their escape before daylight broke to catch them there.

The wire-cutting had started long before midnight. The ruined fence was stretching for more than forty miles up and down the valley with its twin streams of clear water hurrying southward at either side of it. The men at this particular point were three miles east of the rambling log houses, corrals and barns around a great spring in the center of the valley.

Tennessee Johnson and his cowboy night riders figured they had removed the curse of the cow country when they cut one hundred miles of Dunk Rutledge's barbwire. But Tennessee didn't know that the wily Dunk was importing sheep—not cattle—and that eight thousand bated woolies would roam freely in the now fenceless Fiddle Bow country!

The howling dogs rushed up to the men. . . .



Saddles and bridles were carefully covered to hide the glare of a single metal ornament that might be a give-away by reflecting the moonlight. There were eight sweating men in the lot here, and to finish their given task there was still another long mile to go.

It was a strong fence, four and five-strands in places. The cutters worked rapidly, snipping the wires at either side of each stout post. The heavily armed men did not leave their saddles to do it. They simply swung low, made the cuts, and rode on to the next post with their faces dripping perspiration from the tenseness and the fury of the work.

The same thing that was happening here was happening on the forty-mile fence beyond West Fork Creek on the other side of the valley. The sixteen-mile line of fence across the lower end of the valley had probably already been cut to ribbons, like the eight-mile fence across the head of it, by carefully picked men who had attacked the job from all directions.

It was grim business, an out-and-out uprising against the United States Government, itself, but it was a thing that had to be done. A U. S. deputy marshal might be hiding anywhere. Even soldiers might be lurking in the bushes. They would not be easy on a wire-cutter if they caught him red-handed, especially after the federal judge of the district had issued one injunction after another, making it the next thing to a state of martial law where any molestation of Twin Creek Valley was concerned.

A powerful combine with the proper political pull could get things like that. But barbwire surrounding water when cattle were dying for it was something that had to come down regardless of law backed by a few high-handed politicians. Wire was the curse of man or beast, both in summer and in winter. And the one word—*Barbwire!*—was enough to make any cattleman or cowboy want to fight. Hurriedly come upon at night or in a blizzard, it sawed cattle or horses to the bone. A cowboy anywhere in the West was often doomed when he struck it and suddenly found himself being hurled out of his saddle in the darkness in front of a stampeding herd of cattle.

Barbwire had had no place in Twin Creek Valley until the coming of Big Dunk Rutledge to toss in his lot with the Bad Water Land, Cattle & Sheep Company crowd. Old Bank Rutledge, the original owner of the 77, had hated anything that looked like wire. Even sheepmen east or west had always been welcome to water their herds and bed them down for the night on the mile-wide strips of grass on the outer banks of the creek, and yet no man in all Montana had less use for sheep, their owners and their herders than Old Bank Rutledge.

Every decent sheepman or herder could find no fault in him for that. He had had four stalwart sons die in one afternoon in a pitched battle with a big sheep syndicate that had tried to take over the valley long before the old man was found one morning in his bed with a six-shooter beside him and a powder-burned hole shot through his head.

The job east of the 77 was coming to an end when the throaty baying of a dog suddenly ended it. Everybody knew the meaning of it. Big Dunk Rutledge had brought in eight brawny bloodhounds only a few weeks before. At the 77 they had been fed a daily dose of gunpowder. The niter in the powder played havoc with a dog's digestive tract, making him a mean, vicious brute where one encountered him.

At the first sound of the dog's baying the men east of the 77 started falling back as quickly as they could wheel their horses. But it was more than bloodhounds all at once. From a rimrocked rise to westward a wild volley of shots broke loose, the bullets coming over the heads of the dogs rushing forward.

A horse snorted, bawled. It floundered back, half-down, then up in a desperate leap. A man swore at the same time, slumping in his saddle from the sudden shock of pain that ripped through his left arm halfway from the elbow to the shoulder. Another swore a moment later as a bullet struck his saddle-horn with a murderous *whan-ng!*

It was a mad rush after that, the riders wheeling and fleeing for their lives, the bullets still ripping at them through the timber. The dogs were still coming. Behind them a dark blot poured off the rise

out there in the valley. The blot became racing horsemen, no less than a dozen of them spurring and quirting toward the cut fence and the men fleeing beyond it.

"Damn it, we've hit hard luck!" One of the wire-cutters ripped that out before they had gone seven hundred yards in their flying pace through the danger-whistling darkness. "Ride close to the sheriff an' see that he don't fall off that hoss. He's shot, an' it'll never do for him to go down an' get caught."

CHAPTER TWO

Meat for the Bloodhounds

IT WAS only five miles to Buckaroo Bend, the little cattle and horse town to eastward. But the way was rough, up one ragged slope and down another—and riding with an arm that dangled and flopped like a broken wing was enough to drive a man half-crazy.

Perspiration dripped in globules as large as buckshot from the wounded man's face in spite of a cold wind that swooped around the fleeing riders. They entered a narrow break in the hills and struck a mere wild-goat trail through popping brush and hairpin turns around giant shoulders of rocks. The pounding hoofs were hammers and muffled drums that sounded like ringing anvils on the long stretches of shale and sand underfoot.

There was no thought of stopping even when one of the horses grew frightfully lame from a bullet raking him across the right foreleg. They would not stop and leave the horse behind. A bullet-wounded horse with a big, Circle Diamond brand on his left hip would be a dead give-away when the pursuing riders came upon it. By an hour or two after sunup those riders behind—having found such a horse—would be at the Circle Diamond, eight miles north of Buckaroo . . . and they would be backed by guns, federal laws and United States deputy marshals to make all the arrests they pleased.

But the real danger here was the sheriff—the one remaining friend cattlemen had on the side of the law. Tennessee Bill Johnson already had more enemies in the country than the devil could shake a stick at. He had come to Buckaroo for the first

time only two and a half years before, a tall, lean, taciturn man of somewhere in his middle-twenties. Having no halfway measures about him, great numbers had never known how to take him.

Only one thing about him had been a certainty. People had either liked or disliked the soft-spoken newcomer from the beginning. He was the youngest man ever elected sheriff of that wild town of Buckaroo, and there were scores of people who could not forget that whispers of a bad name from somewhere had trailed him into the country. He had been reluctantly pushed into friendly Saturday and Sunday shooting matches almost from the start. His unerring aim and his lightning draw from any position had been the most amazing thing about him.

The majority of cattlemen and cowboys in the rich-grass Fiddle Bow Country did not yet know which side Tennessee Bill Johnson had taken in this new menace springing to life in these deep, well-watered valleys and towering mountain ranges. Once selected after bitter opposition from the cattle and horse-breeding crowds, he was a sheriff who seemed to live in his saddle.

Jealousy between cattlemen and sheepmen was still rampant, and cattlemen often saw him stopping at a sheep camp for a meal after leaving a cow camp at dawn. It was the one thing a sheriff did not do in a cattle and horse country—not if he wanted to heap the harvest of votes when the time for the next election came around! Yet Johnson was a man who would not change, who would not be bossed by any cow or horse clique. He pinched trouble at the base of the bud; stopping it before it could get started and straightening quarrelsome neighbors out without gunplay or a long fight in a courtroom.

Less than a dozen of the fence-cutters who had taken part in this night's wholesale work would know that the Sheriff of Buckaroo had been there wielding a pair of long-handled steel plyers with the best of them. Had he suddenly appeared among them when the work was going on more than half of them would have brazenly tried to shoot it out without stopping to argue the point while the others wheeled their horses to run for it.

The dogs were gaining rapidly. The horsemen behind them were not as bold as their dogs. Not a return shot had been fired at them, but they did not know when the fleeing riders might turn to stand their ground in the darkness and rocks to make a quick, hot fight of it. If those men kept behind, merely following the baying dogs now, the hounds would eventually lead them straight to at least some of the riders, and the law would be able to take its course with everything in favor of the Twin Creek Valley crowd and their rich and powerful backers.

Tennessee Bill Johnson was thinking of all that. If he went down to fall into the hands of those hard-riding men behind, then the honest crowd would not have a single friend on the law side to take their part. In the high notch of a ragged pass he pulled up. He had managed to get his crippled arm inside his shirt to use it as a make-shift sling. A few words told the others what he intended to do, and some of them swore at him for the folly of it.

"Butch, Cassidy and his wild bunch pulled the trick in Idaho!" he snapped back at them as he carefully swung out of his saddle. "We'll do it here—or try like hell. We can't have those dogs following us right on into town. Hit the brush and leave the dogs to me."

Having feared a meeting with the dogs more than Twin Creek Valley riders, he had come prepared for just such a thing. A stout canvas bag hung to the cantle of his saddle. In it, rolled in stout brown paper, was a beef liver sliced into long strips. He took the bag down and his old slicker with it. Opening the bag he walked back through the pass while the others turned aside in the brush and rocks to watch him breathlessly.

The first bristling and baying hound to appear was met by a juicy slice of liver that was tossed forward to strike him squarely in the face. The dog yelped, swinging to one side as if struck with a stone. Before he could recover from his surprise another slice of liver was thrown to him. The dog backed away, barking as the second hound—only seven or eight yards behind—came charging up to receive the same unexpected and mysterious reception.

That second dog was younger than the first. When the liver hit him on the nose he yelped, flung to one side. Johnson spoke to him gently yet firmly, and when the second slice struck the dog in the face his bristles fell. Here was good meat, not contaminated by the smell and taste of gunpowder. The younger hound—seeing that the man meant no harm—grabbed the liver, then jumped for the piece he had missed.

"Well, I be damn!" muttered one of the men in the brush. "Tennessee's doing 'er, ain't he?"

"Hell, yes!" chuckled another voice. "Both of 'em are eatin' now. Still, boys, yuh just can't beat none of them damn Tennessee fellas when it comes to knowin' hounds."

The third dog had come up, bristling and snarling. He saw the others eating, the man standing there offering no fight—offering only meat. There was no smell of fear on the man. He seemed to know all about dogs. This man liked dogs—a dog did not need to be afraid of him. When liver hit the third hound he caught it and eagerly swallowed it with a gulp, rope-like tail wagging for more, all the bellow and bluster gone out of him.

It was the same story when the others came charging up in a strung-out line as if they were devil-bent on tearing everything apart. They stopped, looked, saw and understood. No hound, bloodhound or fox-hound, could stand the sight of seeing another dog eating without at once trying to take part in it. In a minute Johnson was surrounded by wagging tails and hungry mouths. He kept pitching them strips of liver and watching the slope. Now and then he reached down and gave a supposedly vicious brute a pat on the head.

The leading horseman down there was getting close. A big, barrel-chested man, bolder than any of the others, he was about seven hundred yards ahead of the rest of the Twin Creek Valley riders. Thinking the dogs had gone on through the pass because he could hear no baying, he came clattering and banging up. The darkness was a cloak around Johnson until the man was no more than twenty-five feet away.

It was time to let the devil loose now.

Some feeling had come back into the sheriff's wounded arm. He managed to lift it high enough to hold his old slicker in front of him to hide his face and as much of his body as he could in the flashes of gunfire that were to come. Then Johnson's .45 started roaring, the bullets going a yard over the furiously riding Twin Creeker's head.



A YELL of terror filled the pass, a frantic noise that might have come from a man suddenly finding himself in a den of rattlesnakes. The man's horse plunged to a halt so quickly it was like a racing animal colliding with the side of a rock-walled mountain. The rider jarred loose, went up in the air, curved, and came twisting and smashing down on his back.

Johnson reached forward as the dazed man was getting up, snatching a big black handkerchief from around his neck. Two shots from the wire-cutting gents slammed down at either side of the dazed man and appeared to lift him off the ground. Yelling his head off in terror and the dogs snarling at him, the man went plunging back down the slope after his horse that had wheeled and charged away from him.

It did not not take long for the rest of it. A loose horse and a man charging down that slope as if forty devils were after them were noise enough to turn any blood-hungry crew. The other riders below stopped, wheeling their horses. A few more shots from the pass told them what to do. They slammed spurs to their horses, and were heading back toward Twin Creek Valley with the loose horse following them, his stirrups popping, the unsaddled rider trailing the horse and yelling like a maniac.

"An' now what?" grinned lanky, hawk-faced old Ben Crow, owner of the Circle Diamond, as he ventured forward. "Slickest thing I ever saw, Tennessee. They took to yuh right off the reel, but yuh shorely ain't goin' in to keepin' bloodhounds for yoreself?"

"I know dogs." Johnson was still pitching liver. "We'll do the same thing Butch Cassidy did when he robbed the bank in Montpelier, Idaho. . . . Lick it up, pups!

You're nice dogs and I wish I owned the whole pack, but we've got to get going."

He fed them the last of the liver, then tossed the sack away. Now he wadded up the big, sweaty handkerchief he had jerked from the Twin Creek Valley rider's neck. He held it to the nose of a lean, droopy-eyed old female and pointed to the ground. At once her tail was up, nose lowering. Johnson then brushed the handkerchief in front of the noses of the others.

The old female let out a few doleful yelps. The others joined her. Noses to the ground, tails in the air, the entire pack headed back down the slope and were soon making the cold morning air ring with their wailing and crying.

"An' now," nodded Crow, soberly, "I know what that word called *amasin'* means! But—but what'll they do with that fella when they catch up with him back down yonder, Tennessee? Bloodhounds, I'm told, are about the meanest things that run on four legs. Won't they just eat 'im down right off his feet when they catch up with 'im?"

"It's according to how much our running friend knows about bloodhounds." Johnson was grinning broadly in spite of the pain in his arm. "Bloodhounds are the most abused dogs in the world. They're not bad, very rarely bad as a general rule. It's only man who tries to make them mean. Tracking down a man is only a game to the dogs, one they love to play. If that fellow running his legs off down there knows dogs, he'll turn around and come back to meet them. But," he shrugged and winced from a stab of pain shooting up his wounded arm, "if he's fool enough to grab a rock or a stick to make a fight of it, then may hell pity the poor damned jackass! A bloodhound will fight the devil, if the devil wants to fight."

CHAPTER THREE

Hanging Evidence

HE had changed his bloody shirt and coat, and was sitting quietly at his desk in the east side of the office of the jail when eight o'clock came. The bullet that had gone through his arm had made a clean, neat hole. A bone had had a hard rake, but it had not been broken.

The blood had soon stopped dripping. A dressing and a bandage had been applied, and the sleeve of his shirt and his long-tailed black coat hid the slight bulge.

The arm was still awkwardly stiff and painful to move. His face was pale. After all, he had lost quite a lot of blood, but there was an outward calm about him as he stared down the street through the window, waiting for developments he knew would come before the steadily warming spring morning could possibly become much older.

Buckaroo was just a little too quiet to suit a man who knew its spasmodic habits, its quick quarrels now and then, and occasional gunfights that could break loose with scarcely a moment's warning. Only four saddled horses stood in front of Thunder River Jake Lord's rowdy-crowd Silver Dollar, a false-fronted two-story plank-and-log affair on the west side of the wide street.

On the east side, lined up at the hitch-rail in front of Old Pat Brady's stone-walled and shake-roofed Grizzly Queen, were three more tired horses. The little stream of sparkling water racing down the middle of the street, and crossed by six narrow footbridges, was the brightest thing in town. The houses and places of business flanking it were a shaggy, jagged-looking lot—some poked too far forward, some set too far back from the winding old board walks as if everybody in town was on the outs with the other fellow.

Quick work had accomplished a lot of things and set the stage for the big row that was certain to come. Just before dawn, riding down through a dense pine thicket to the rear doors of the town stable, eight of the wire-cutting gents had unsaddled their mounts.

Old Ben Crow's frightfully lame horse had had his wound dressed, then turned into a dark box-stall in a secluded corner of the stables. Crow selected one of the sheriff's horses, and casually rode down the street.

Tennessee Johnson, allowing his tired and sleepy gaze to trail on down the mountain-walled valley, could see two low lines of half-ragged and trail-worn tents under a great grove of tall cottonwoods and willows on the east bank of the creek that wrapped itself half around the west side

of the town. Those tents and a stout picket-rope lined with army horses marked the camp of a troop of cavalymen that had recently been sent into the Fiddle Bow Country.

No one had taken it upon himself to tell Tennessee Bill Johnson why those soldiers had come. A man did not have to be told some things. This country was in a jam, a big jam, and the soldiers—being made puppets by certain higher-ups—were here to take sides with the underhanded crowd who were managing to bring about the dark cloud of trouble slowly settling over the Fiddle Bow. Blood alone would clear that cloud.

The only thing that was puzzling right at the moment was the delay of Big Dunk Rutledge getting into town to report the disaster to his fence. It was not often in the West that a man lost more than one hundred miles of high-priced fence in one night. Rutledge had lost a fortune in all that barbwire. He would splice all of it that he could, but that would be a job to keep a gang working for weeks. It was not ordinary cattle-barb, either.

Big Dunk was a fellow to overdo a thing, once he set his bull-headed will to a job. Ordinary cattle wire came with the barbs spaced five inches apart. Hog wire came with the barbs three inches apart. Backed by his dead uncle's bank account and the agents of the Bad Water Land, Cattle & Sheep Company, Big Dunk had gone the limit, buying the double-stout wire and setting in posts strong enough to hold charging bulls.

Johnson was smoking a cigarette when he saw a big, red-faced, square-jawed man in dark-blue under a broad-brimmed white hat come out of the Silver Dollar. That six-footer with his big belly, his broad and deep chest would be Marshal Flint O'Reilly. He was soon joined by another red-faced man, garbed almost in the same fashion. A shorter, thicker-bellied man, the second one was Joshua D. Steel, another U. S. deputy marshal, smarter-talking and quicker-triggered than big Tim. Johnson watched them turn up the street to swing abruptly to their left and enter the Rocky Mountain Café, three doors above the Silver Dollar.

It was time now to make a showing of some kind. Johnson rolled and lighted a

cigarette. With a .45 riding forward at each side of his stomach on his broad belt, the butts of each weapon concealed by his long-tailed coat, he arose and strolled out, heading down the street. It was a painful thing to do, but he let his left arm swing as naturally as he could. He turned into the Rocky Mountain to slide himself on a stool at the counter beside the two marshals.

O'Reilly, the half-pleasant one, was the nearest to his right. He looked up, bobbed his head. "Top of the mornin' to you, Sheriff Johnson."

"The same to you—and Steel." Johnson nodded, then spoke to the bald-headed Rube Parker behind the counter. "Coffee, ham and eggs, Rube."

"Coffee's smokin' up." Parker slid a steaming cup in front of him. "Nice day, ain't it, Sheriff? Still," he cocked his head to the left, "I'd say yuh look sorter pale 'round the gills this mornin'. Sleep well?"

"When I finally got to my bunk, yes." Johnson was watching O'Reilly and Steel out of the corners of his eyes. Steel was a hunched figure over a cup of coffee into

which he had just poured an enormous slug of brandy from a silver flask everybody knew he carried on his hip. "A lot of riding and paper-serving work to do these days. Guess it was somewhere around midnight—maybe even later—before I got in."

"Musta been later than that, yeah." Parker was breaking eggs into a pan. "I was open 'til after two. Went up there lookin' for yuh an' banged my fist off on the front door. Couldn't get a stir outa yuh. Coulda swore yuh wasn't there at all, an' I needed yuh bad. A couple of Rollin' W boys an' a couple of Rafter Cross fellas was in here startin' a fight. All had too much to drink an' come mighty nigh bustin' up the whole damn place. One of the Rollin' W fellas got stabbed in the belly with a fork when he had Hack Jones of the Rafter Cross down betwix the counter an' the stools tryin' to gouge the eyeballs outa his head. Wasn't too bad in the end, I guess, but Doc Kelly had to fix 'em both up crost the street. They shook hands an' had a drink together after it was over, an' I reckon they finally rid off home. I

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4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

thought they made enough racket to wake the dead."

"They did that," put in O'Reilly, turning now and looking at the sheriff narrowly. "If it hadn't been for me and Joshua they would have torn the town apart. You must have gone to sleep in your saddle and didn't get in until some little while just before dawn, Johnson. I happened to know that. I was awake long before daylight and took a little walk. I was up there above the jail when I saw you come in with a bunch of riders behind you. You came down through that pine thicket and entered the corrals and the barn behind the jail, through the back door and the gate."

It looked like a direct catch, but Johnson did not have to think up a quick answer. A wild ringing of hoofs sounded in the street and came pounding down it with seven horsemen appearing. They shot on past the café, a swirling cloud of dust boiling up behind them as they sawed to a quick halt in front of the Silver Dollar.



DUNK RUTLEDGE and six of his burly two-gun men had come at last, their horses lathered and dripping with sweat. Rutledge was one of those devil-may-care characters who stood out as the boss of his gang anywhere he traveled. He was a big, broad-shouldered, deep-chested man—a dark-faced bull on two feet with a short, close-clinging black beard as he piled himself out of his saddle at the hitchrail. A loud dresser in a black and white-checked shirt, fancy chaps and spike-heeled boots that might have been made for a woman, he stood there for a moment, glaring up and down the street.

At either hip was a long black .45. On the back of his skull rode a great-brimmed white hat, held in place Mexican-style by a broad strap of braided leather looped under his chin. The last unusual touch about him was his hair. It was as thick and as straight as a horse's tail, combed forward and cut into flat-plastered bangs hanging to his dark forehead. He spoke to somebody in the doorway of the Silver Dollar, then wheeled, long-shanked spurs

ringing and dragging harshly on the crooked board walk as he headed straight for the café.

"Well, the worst has happened, O'Reilly!" Dunk Rutledge scarcely glanced at Johnson as he came half-charging into the room. "My fence was cut to hell last night. Maybe all of it for what I can tell just now. Some of my men jumped a bunch of them east of the ranch-house where they were cutting wire.

"There was some gunplay. One of them was hit. I could see the blood on the ground myself, dripped on the rocks here and there for a couple of miles toward Buckaroo. The boys tried to trail them. Seth Gunney even had my bloodhounds after them. They made a sudden pull-up in a pass and started to shoot it out. The dogs went on, and they pulled a fast one somehow on those bloodhounds—damn them!

"They turned the dogs back on Seth after his horse had thrown him. Yes, right back on Seth! Hell, we had to fight them off and take him out of a tree just about an hour ago! I want action on this, damn it! I won't stand for it. We've got federal backing, and somebody's going to jail or singe his neck on a rope for that job."

"Tell us more about it, Dunk." Johnson swung around on his stool to face him. "You might have a cup of coffee first to catch your wind. Those dogs, now, I thought—"

"Damn the dogs!" snarled Rutledge. "I paid eleven hundred dollars for that pack of long-eared, droopy-eyed fools, and they break back on the trail and chase one of my own men up a tree! But here's something in the way of straight from the shoulder evidence that might interest a mighty fine sheriff like you, Mister Johnson."

Rutledge sneered as he jammed his right hand into his hip-pocket and flung a nickel-plated deputy sheriff's star on the counter. "Here's hanging evidence, good enough for any court! That thing's got a number six on it, Mister Johnson. Maybe you, the lawfully elected sheriff of this man's town, can tell us who the hell you gave it to, eh? Mink Patton, one of my men, thinks he saw old Ben Crow wearing it not more than a week ago."

It was another direct catch, dangerously embarrassing to a sheriff faced by three men he knew were bitter enemies who would stoop to anything to discredit and even jail or kill a man they wanted out of their way. But again Johnson's luck saved him.

The thundering roar of a .45 Colt came from the direction of the Silver Dollar. A bellow of oaths and yells came with it. Then—as grimly as an undertaker driving nails in a coffin—three more heavy explosions followed the first. A wild rush of booted and spurred heels came immediately after that, the wreckage of the suddenly broken swinging doors of the Silver Dollar falling and crashing on the boarded walk as a cursing and stumbling group of big-hatted men tore their way outside.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blood on the Moon

THE noise of those thundering shots down the street was enough to shake some of the arrogance out of Big Dunk Rutledge. He flung back against the wall as if someone had stabbed him. Johnson left his unfinished breakfast on the counter and jumped immediately from the stool to go leaping out the door.

O'Reilly and Steel back-jumped from the remainder of their meals to follow him. Rutledge swung in behind them, looking like a man scared half out of his wits. Rube Parker, deciding to let business go for the moment, swung his huge figure over the counter and trailed out after the little group.

Out of the six Twin Creek Valley gunmen who had entered the Silver Dollar only four were in sight now—wild-eyed men who had plunged under the hitch-rail to take shelter among their horses. Johnson swept past them with scarcely a glance in that direction. Shoulders squared, he plowed through the broken swinging doors, the acrid bite of burned powder striking him in the face the instant he entered the dark room.

Half-blind from the bright sunlight outside, he stumbled and almost fell over the body of a big, dark-bearded man lying on the floor of the saloon near the front door.

It did not look as if there was anybody behind the bar for the moment. Only one man stood leaning in front of it, half-limp left arm clinging like a broken limb of a tree to the handrail, a six-shooter hanging loosely in his right hand.

All the others in the Silver Dollar had swung back against the wall, watchful hawks with their nostrils quivering from the excitement, their faces white and grim. Above them the gunsmoke weaved, a slow, wavering cloud lifting drunkenly to shadow-pool around the three big brass lamps above the glass and bottle-strewn black bar.

The man against the bar was an Arrowhead rider, a little, buck-toothed cowboy by the name of Elmer Darby. As Johnson entered, pushing on under the cloud of smoke, Darby turned, his head bobbing, and looked at him like a man in the last stages of intoxication trying to peer through a dense bank of fog. His mouth worked, twisting to one side as he tried to grin. A thick, throaty sound that was an attempt to laugh came from him. Then he spoke, his voice a croak.

"Oh, it's yuh—*Tennessee!*"

The gasped-out sentence of the Arrowheader marked the end of him. Suddenly losing his balance in a one-sided run, he slithered his back along the handrail for a couple of yards toward the rear door, then buckled at the middle and came down with a noisy clatter as his limber body landed on two big brass cuspidors standing between the footrail and the bar. Without another sound, without even so much as a last groan, the man was still, life slipping out of the hole in his middle.

A sound now came from behind the bar. It was only a glass being accidentally raked off the wash-trough and splintering to pieces on the floor, but it was like the harsh stroke of a gong in the breathless silence of the room. The huge bald head of Thunder River Jake Lord appeared, round pink eyes popping in the broad face that had lost all its ruddy glow. He came on up, clutching the drain-trough for support. His voice was a squeak that might have come from a scared mouse.

"I—I didn't have nothin' to do with it, Tennessee. I—I was only servin' 'em the drinks."

"That's the Twin Cricker what started

it." Old Ben Crow was coming forward—the very man Johnson wanted to see. Crow pointed now toward the tall, raw-boned and red-headed body of another dead man all but hidden behind the big-bellied cast-iron stove in the center of the room. "He come in an' started cussin' about everybody in the place bein' a no-good gang of tinhorn cowboys. Elmer got mad. He give him a shove an' told him to keep his mouth shut. The Twin Cricker caught a spur over the footrail an' fell sprawlin'. He fired that first shot as he come up, an' his ball, I reckon, caught Elmer in the belly.

"Elmer let drive, an' the red-head ended up behind that stove. Then that fella near the door wheeled back from the bar, pawin' for his guns. He got in one shot at Elmer—an' Elmer blasted him through the heart, if that big smear of blood on his shirt an' vest means anything to my old eyes. We don't like this thing of pickin' a fight an' gettin' men killed, Tennessee."

"Keep your mouth shut!" snapped Johnson, catching him by the arm. "Nobody with one eye and bat-sense likes it, but there's no use making it worse by hot talk."

It was his chance. Dunk Rutledge and the two deputy marshals were still in the front doorway, standing there with their mouths open. Rube Parker was just behind them, peering over their shoulders. The Twin Creekers who had scattered among the horses were venturing back, now that their big boss was here. Their hands were on the butts of their six-shooters as they looked in with white faces and sullen glints in their eyes.

With his broad back to the door to hide what he was doing, Johnson's right hand made a quick move from the pocket of his vest to Crow.

"You lost the other one," Johnson whispered. "Rutledge found it. This is a number *nine*. Remember that. You *never* had a number six. . . . All right, gents!" His voice lifted as he turned back toward the doorway. "This case looks like it's already tried without the usual fat fees for a court-house crowd. There's no use in starting an argument as to who was right or wrong. We'll get the bodies of these men out of here. Ben Crow will see

that they go across the street to Doc Kelly's back room. Somebody may want to hold an inquest just for the looks of things."

"Sure, now, an inquest is always formal." Marshal Tim O'Reilly had come forward, Steel behind him. Rutledge and Parker behind them. "'Tis only a couple of hundred dollars of the public's money it will cost, and every little thing will be legal. But first, and before I say more, I'd have a bit of a question or two with Mr. Crow. . . . You are a deputy sheriff, I believe, Mr. Crow?"

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"PORTER, I guess yuh would call it." Crow looked at him innocently enough. "I've never tried workin' at it steady, but I do serve some papers now an' then, public notices an' things like that to kinda help Tennessee out in the work lawyers are always hammerin' at him to do."

"Then," nodded O'Reilly, "a deputy, to be sure, would have a badge. You would have yours, I take it?"

"Why, I think so—yeah." Crow produced it from his vest pocket and dropped it in the big marshal's palm. "To tell the truth, maybe, I don't wear it much. But—but what the hell dô yuh want with it? Yore badge ain't big enough for yuh? It looks like a dinner plate to me!"

"Aye, 'tis a badge, all right." O'Reilly glared at it, then turned and showed it to Rutledge. Glancing back over his shoulder, he asked the old cattleman another quick question: "You would know the number on it, I take it, Mr. Crow?"

"Why, yeah, I reckon I know," nodded Crow, playing his game unflinchingly. "It's a number nine, ain't it?"

"And here," snapped in Johnson, looking hard at Rutledge, "is the number six you gave me just a little while ago. Does that make you satisfied, Dunk?"

"No, by hell, I'm not satisfied!" snarled Rutledge. "There's a wolf in the bushes somewhere around here. I'll get him out before I'm done with him. But don't you think you should ask my men something about this fight? They have a right to speak. For all you know this crowd might be telling a plain damned lie about it all

the way around. I want this whole bunch arrested. If you won't do it, then I'll take the next step. Federal Judge Robert Light will issue warrants—"

"An' the blacksmith down the street," shot in Ben Crow, "will make a coffin for yuh if yuh even hint once more that I'm lyin', yuh barbwire-stringin' skunk—"

"Shut it down, Ben!" Johnson stepped quickly between the old man and Rutledge. "And you'll keep a straight tongue in your mouth, too, Dunk!" He whirled back to the scowling, white-faced Rutledge. "Something tells me that your bullying and trying to run everything in sight is going to make us mix powdersmoke one of these days. When that time comes you'll have two holes where those mean damned black eyes are glowering like a snake's right now. This country's had enough of you and your kind—"

"Too damn much of him an' his kind, Tennessee!" bawled a voice from the front door. "By dam, we oughta kill him now, this minute. We oughta take him out an' hang him to the highest cottonwood limb we can find—an' I'm hopin' we do it quick so he don't get outa town alive!"

No one inside the Silver Dollar had paid any attention to the white horse that had come clattering up the street. An old, old man in battered and half-ragged gray now stood in the doorway with a long Colt sagging a worn holster at his right hip. He was little and dried-up, like his crippled and twisted hands, a rheumy-eyed ghost of a man whose hair and beard was as white as the snows on the distant peaks.

Old Dan Landy, owner of the Two Star a dozen miles south of Buckaroo, had struck town madder than the devil on a rampage. His sudden coming was a shock that appeared to set every man in the room back on his heels. For the moment

the shooting in the Silver Dollar was forgotten. The blustering Rutledge had wheeled, mouth slopped open with surprise, face yellow with a mingled feeling of awe and rage as he looked at Old Dan Landy.

"We know now why them troopers are camped down yonder on the crick—" Landy's voice had changed to a quavering, half-crying whine, his lips and entire body trembling with rage. "Yeah, we know! The right kinda money an' the right kinda crowd brought 'em, that's what! They're here to protect that bang-wearin' two-legged *thing* an' his interest!" He gouged a crooked finger at Rutledge, voice rising into an old woman's shriek. "What would Ole Bank Rutledge say this mornin'? Just let somebody tell me how many times would Bank turn over in his grave—if we could only tell him that *eight thousand head of sheep are headin' right now for the Seventy Seven!*"

"*Sheep?*" Ben Crow's voice was a squeak. His hawkish old face had suddenly become longer, leaner and more ghost-like. He weaved on his run-over boot heels, looking for a moment as if he was about to sink to his knees right there on the floor in front of the bar. "*Eight—eight thousan' head?* Hell, no, Dan!"

"Why—why," he turned, looking all around as he cackled out a sudden attempt to laugh, "this is one of yore jokes. Shore now, Dan, shore!" The laugh arose to a splattering bark. "Such a thing would mean blood on the moon all over this country. Why—why, it can't be the truth, boys. Dan—Dan's jokin'."

His last word was like a whisper coming all the way from the back of the room. Johnson had just time enough to jump forward and catch him in the crook of his right arm as he reeled back against the bar, then toppled toward the floor to faint for the first time in his hectic old life.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The Army Speaks

A BIG, bald-headed Rattleweed rider and a Circle Diamond man, both knowing the hidden condition of Johnson's arm, came forward in a rush to take charge of the sagging Crow. Snatching him off his feet between them, they rushed the limp figure across the room and into a chair at a table against the wall.

Jake Lord filled a glass slopping-full of ice water and passed it across the bar to be spilled into Crow's face. Everybody else seemed to have forgotten the dead men on the floor and were following Old Dan Landy back out the doorway to the street.

The rolling blasts of gunfire and the quick killings in the Silver Dollar had already snatched half of Buckaroo to life. Men had come swarming up and down the street from everywhere. An ever-growing crowd now jammed the walk in front of the saloon.

Other excited mobs were out there in the middle of the street, some of them standing on the foot-bridges, others ganged up and down on either side of the little stream. Every man in the street and on the planked walls now stared southward, the most of them with their hands up shading their eyes from the bright glare of the morning sun, each face filled with awe.

"Thar, by grab!" Landy had shuffled on ahead of Johnson. Now suddenly he had halted and turned, an old claw of a right hand swinging up and pointing. "Does that yuh see 'way down yonder look like a joke to yuh, *Mister Johnson*?"

Johnson was staring, a man not wanting to believe his own eyes. Far down the valley, at least eight miles away and crossing it from east to west, moved a dirty-gray mass flanked by men on horses with the barrels of rifles and carbines glinting in the sunlight. Behind that gray mass followed four big lumbering sheep wagons with their canvas tops swaying and gangs of dogs following them. Each enormous wagon was pulled by four shaggy horses, meaning that those wagons had come over

rough country before reaching the valley.

"Some of them riders are troopers with them sheep." Landy's old voice was still quivering. "That ain't right! Yuh know it ain't right, Johnson. A lot of them troopers ain't likin' it worth a good dam! Some of them fellas used to be cowboys, an' they know the soldiers ain't supposed to be used like this. Army folks are supposed to be on the square, ain't they, Johnson?"

"The army ~~is~~ on the square, Mr. Landy." Johnson was still staring white-faced down the valley. "It's the usual run of dirty and underhanded politics that you've got to thank for this! A soldier has to take orders. His officers have to take them from the high-ups. Let's not blame the troopers for doing what they have to do."

"Don't blame 'em?" Landy turned, rheumy old eyes wide, lips quivering. "If a man was a *man*, he wouldn't be doin' that, I say! It just shows yuh what the law can do—with money an' a big batch of votes behind it! An' you're part of the law, Johnson. Yeah, *the law!*" He stepped back, face a mask of hate. "But—when I die, I can say I never flung my vote away on yuh. No sir, I voted for Pyle Kenney, I did. Pyle, they said, wasn't much of a sheriff, never caught a hoss or a cow-thief in his life. Maybe he did spend his time drinkin' an' gamblin', but we didn't have sheep cuttin' crost our ranges like them down yonder. Say, what the hell are yuh grinnin' at?"

"Just doing a little thinking." Johnson nodded toward the east side of the street. "Pyle Kenney doesn't seem to be going hungry for a job, if my eyes are not fooling me. That looks like a deputy marshal's badge he's wearing this morning."

"A—a *what?*"

Landy turned, staring. A tall, raw-boned man of fifty with a short-clipped blond mustache was standing on the walk and leaning against the wall of a little saddle and harness shop just below Pat Brady's Grizzly Queen. Two big six-shooters were shoved forward on his broad belts. A sawed-off shotgun lay cradled across the crook of his left arm. On the broad left lapel of his gray coat was a badge that looked half the size of a man's hand.

"Pyle Kenney," the sheriff was going on quietly, "seems to have found himself a job from somebody."

"Good Lord!" groaned Landy, rubbing a crippled hand across his face. "Shorely, now, I ain't goin' to be a danged fool an' faint like Ben Crow! It—it is a marshal's badge, ain't it. Pyle! Pyle!" His voice lifted to a shriek. "What are yuh doin' with that thing on yore coat? Don't tell me yo're agin us!"

"I'm with the law!" bellowed back the tall man. "I'm always with the law whether fools have got sense enough to re-elect me or not. Yuh better watch yoreself, Landy. If hell breaks, we'll settle it so fast it'll make ever'body's head swim. Better take a look up an' down the street—an' keep yore old mouth shut!"



JOHNSON was already looking. Blue-clad troopers seemed to have mysteriously appeared from everywhere. Leaving their horses behind stores, houses and saloons at either side of the town, they had come forward quietly. At least fifteen of them lined each of the crooked-plank walks. They were still as quiet as shadows, men simply standing there, half of them leaning on their carbines, the other half with their weapons cradled across their arms.

"Listen, *everybody!*" Big Dunk Rutledge's voice rolled up and down the street as he suddenly mounted the upper end of the hitchrail like a speaker on a stump. "Those *are* my sheep down the valley. Those sheep are headed for Twin Creek Valley. That was the one reason I set up such a stout fence—that fence," he looked straight at Johnson, "that some low-livered gang, *backed by some dirty rat*, had the guts to cut to ribbons last night! A hell of a lot of good it's going to do the people who cut it! You may now find my sheep wandering out of bounds. I had the fence to stop them, to keep them in the valley. I don't have a fence now, but the law knows I did have it. This whole country may turn from cows to sheep yet—and you fools won't be able to help yourselves now! And I dare you to start something!"

"Attention!" A young lieutenant's

voice rang out from just above the Grizzly Queen like the sound of a bugle ripping up and down the street. Instantly the troopers along the walks were snapping to life, figures straightening and stiffening, their rifle-butts clattering on the planks as they brought them to heel. "Aim—and hold your fire!"

"Just like that, you see!" Rutledge's wild spasm of laughter blasting out over the dumb-stricken crowds was like a sudden thunderclapping in the street. "Make one move—just one little move if you've got the guts! Move, *damn you*, and watch this street fill full of *dead men!*"

"That will do out of you, *Rutledge!*" The boy-faced lieutenant was taking another quick hand in it now. "Get the hell off that hitchrack or I'll have you shot off of it! We're carrying out our orders—whether we like the orders or not. But let me tell all of you something! I'll have no man or any gang of men deliberately trying to fan these people into moves that would be disastrous. Rutledge, you'll take your men and get out of town. This is an armed camp. Any fool can see that, but my men are not here to kill any one, if we can avoid it. We're here to keep men from being killed. Get going, *Rutledge!*"

"What—what the hell?" snarled Rutledge. "Just who do you think you are! Why—you can't do me like this, Lieutenant Snead! I'm a tax-payer, I'm a voter. I'm a growing power in this country! I'll tell you or anybody else to go to hell any old time I feel like it!"

"Attention, *Sergeant Blandon!*" Lieutenant Snead's voice again rolled like a bugle call up and down the street. "Step two paces forward, and take aim at that man on the hitchrack. I am going to count three. Just three, Blandon! If that man is not down off the hitchrack by the end of my count, then you will fire—and shoot him down. *One!*"

"Damn it, I can't fight the army!" Rutledge dropped back to the walk, then pushed on to his horse. "Hit your saddles, men! That tin soldier can't beat me. Hell, we'll see that Judge Light, and that young fool's going to hear what federal law has to say about this! You bet I'll see, and you'll be hearing from me damned soon, Snead!"

Tears were rolling down old Dan Lan-

dy's face. "Johnson, I'm sick." He reeled and seized the sheriff by the left arm with both hands, the fierce grip and sudden pain making Johnson dizzy for a moment. "Do yuh mind if yuh sorter lead me back into the Silver Dollar or on over to Pat Brady's? I—I think I've got to take my first drink since Christmas to kinda steady me."

CHAPTER SIX

Two-Legged Dynamite

BIG Dunk Rutledge ignored his dead gunmen in the Silver Dollar and galloped on down the street with a cloud rising behind him and the four remaining men of his little gang. Dan Landy was still holding to Johnson's wounded arm when he led the old man inside and pushed him into a chair to order a glass of whiskey for him.

Cowboys were already carrying out the body of Elmer Darby. Ben Crow had recovered with the aid of a few glasses of whiskey, and the bodies of the Twin Creek Valley gunmen were reluctantly carried across the street a few minutes later. Johnson followed along with Crow and the four men carrying the bodies to the dingy little back room where he left them in charge of the gray-haired Doc Kelly.

The crowds had scattered, disappearing in the drinking places. The soldiers had relaxed, but they were keeping their places to be ready for anything that might come now. With his arm paining him unmercifully, Johnson headed up the street for the jail, a man thoroughly mystified as to what he would or could do now to save this whole country around him from a terrible blood-letting.

As he stepped from the narrow front porch into the office of the jail he saw that he had a caller. Old Bullet Head Hank Bender, the local judge, sat behind the desk in the one really comfortable chair in the room. A battered derby hung at a cockeyed angle to the back of his head. As usual a fat chew of tobacco was in his jaw and he was constantly stroking his unruly dark-brown beard and shaggy mustache. His big feet were planted on a smaller chair in front of him so that he

could look out the window and down the street without bothering himself by the unnecessary business of having to turn his head.

Bullet Head Hank was a type seen in many places in the old West. He was now a man of somewhere close to seventy, a good-natured old rum-pot with a beet-red nose and a whiskey-tenor voice. In his earlier days he had been a mule-skinner, cowboy, gambler, squaw-man, saloon-keeper, a sheriff and a gun-fighter who had met the tough ones in many tight places.

Bullet Head now owned three dog-eared law books dotted with burns from cigar butts and copiously smeared with those telltale rings left by whiskey glasses. The rest of his worldly possessions were not much better. He owned two wall-eyed black mares, a lop-sided buggy and a half-decent shift of clothing.

He held court where they wanted it, at the graveside, in a sheep or cow camp, or over the head of a whiskey barrel in anybody's saloon. Education as far as books were concerned had never kept him awake in the past, and was not very likely to do so in the future. He seemed entirely alone in the room until he let fly a streak of tobacco juice at the cuspidor, gave his beard a downward paw, and waved his left hand toward a chair in the corner.

"Meet the lady, Tennessee!" he falsettoed. "Miss, this is our sheriff. Set down an' take the load off yore feet, Tennessee, if yuh can find another chair in yore dump that shouldn't have been thrown out years ago."

Johnson looked at the girl as she arose. At once he knew that he had never seen her before. She was about twenty, dressed in gray, tall and light-haired. A striking girl with wide, frank blue eyes as she extended her hand.

"I am Bill Johnson, ma'am," he told her as their hands touched. He was smiling in spite of the nagging pain in his arm. "The 'Tennessee' part is something they saddled on me out here because I came from that part of the country."

"I am Grace Marlin," she smiled back at him. "My uncle mentioned you in the last of the letters I received from him."

"Set down, both of yuh." Bullet Head

dragged his feet from the smaller chair and kicked it toward the girl. "Draw up yore seats. The gal is from Saint Joe, Missouri. She's ole Bank Rutledge's niece, Tennessee. Got in town last night just before dark on the Northbound stage from Dog Crick. Big Dunk maybe don't know she's here yet. I took her over on the east side to Granny Miller's.

"Granny told 'er at the supper table that I'm supposed to be a judge, an' the gal later got me in a corner an' told me her troubles. I told her to hold her tongue a little while. I could take her to see that damn fool Judge Bob Light, but he'd probably only talk to her like yuh half-cuss at a dog with fleas. She's Bank's real niece, his sister's daughter. That suck-egg Dunk's only half-baked kinfolks. Bank had a brother he didn't get along with very good. Pistol-shootin' gambler an' a woman's fool who married a dance-hall hussy down in Texas. She had a boy seven or eight years old. That boy was Dunk—"

"But—but, your honor, please!" cried the startled girl. "I didn't tell you anything in the world like that!"

"No, yuh didn't tell me. *Set down!*" He jabbed his thumb at another nearby chair. "Yuh didn't tell me much, just showed me a lot of letters Bank had writ to yuh. But yuh forget, Miss Marlin," he glowered at her as she eased into a chair to his left, "that me an' Bank Rutledge used to drink out of the same bottle an' jug. Nigh twenty years it was like that, an' whiskey-heads talk when they drink. The best thing yuh can do is to hang on to them letters yuh've got from Bank.

"Bank didn't aim for Dunk to have the Seventy Seven, Tennessee!" He looked up through his shaggy brows as Johnson seated himself on the edge of the desk. "I knowed it when Dunk come. One thing I didn't know was just where to write an' find this girl. The day we held the inquest at the Seventy Seven I looked the house upside an' down, tryin' to find some of this gal's letters. Bank didn't burn 'em, he didn't tear 'em up, but I found no hide nor hair of 'em. An' when Dunk arrived for the funeral an' claimed 'imself the heir to the ranch— Well, damn it, he got it through Judge Lige Teebo down yonder in Dog Crick. Ever'body knows the

Bad Water Company helped him get it."

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"**A**ND everybody by now," nodded Johnson, "should know where he got all those sheep that crossed the valley this morning. But we can forget some of that for the moment. This girl's in danger. She might as well have that impressed on her now. . . . You'll have to know the truth some time, Miss Marlin, and you might as well get it straight from the shoulder right here."

"I've told her yuh wouldn't dodge facts," said the judge, "but I didn't tell yuh that she went to see a lawyer in Dog Crick the first thing yesterday when she got off the Overland. The lawyer she went to see was Pooley Sharpe—if that means anything to yuh."

"Pooley Sharpe!" Johnson's eyes widened. "Why, of all men, Pooley Sharpe, Miss Marlin?"

"Why—why, I don't know exactly." The girl had slumped back in her chair. "The depot agent said he was a good lawyer. He had a big sign all the way across the front of a two-story house right behind the depot. The sign said—"

"Yes, I know!" cut in Johnson quickly. "It said everything! And the depot agent didn't lie to you. Pooley Sharpe is the biggest, blackest sharper in the pay of the Bad Water Land, Cattle and Sheep Company—and that company is backing Dunk Rutledge. How did you get away from Sharpe without his asking you for your uncle's letters?"

"By accident, yuh would call it." Bender answered him. "She missed her train the mornin' she was to leave Saint Joe. Her trunk come on ahead of her, an' the bundle of letters was in the trunk. The trunk was here in the express office waitin' for her. That's why Pooley ain't got them letters right now."

"But if Sharpe knows all about her," frowned Johnson, "then Dunk and his crowd either know by this time or they soon will know. That only makes the danger all the greater for Miss Marlin. The letters and any other proof she has are dynamite—"

"Meanin' herself, too," said Bullet

Head. "Yeah. She can talk, an' her talk won't sound well. If I make or sign any order, Judge Light will take the authority on himself to sign another fifteen minutes later to kill it. Yo've got a job piled square on yore brisket, Tennessee—a first-class cow-an'-sheep war roarin' right now to the blood an' gunsmoke, an' a pretty gal's life in yore hands at the same time. Yuh bought yoreself somethin' when yuh took on this job. Yuh shore did! And it ain't gonna be no weak-kneed chore to settle it."

He pushed back his battered derby and scratched his head vigorously. "Yuh ain't only got dynamite to handle, yo're settin' on a pile of it bigger'n a hoss, an' a fuse is already lit an' smokin' in each end of it, Mr. Tennessee Bill. I don't envy you none a-tall!"

"But—but why should I be in danger?" The girl was on her feet again. "Uncle Bank said the best people in the world were out here. All my life I have wanted to come. Uncle Bank wanted me, and now—now you try to tell me I have come with my life in my hand! And that the people here—"

"Miss Marlin," Johnson looked her squarely in the eyes, "Some of the best people in the world are here—and some of the meanest. Dunk Rutledge is one of the latter. If all you say is true, he would kill any man, any woman or child before he would give up a tenth of the fortune that has fallen into his hands. He has backing that will stand behind him through every court in the country. He means to keep everything he has!"

"An' then they'll steal the eyeballs out of his mean head," nodded Bender. "Yuh see, we want to help yuh if we can. Tennessee, now, ain't got jaybird sense at times. If he thinks he's on the right side, then he sticks to that side, come hell or high water. *Uh!*" He winced. "There goes off a stick of yore dynamite, sheriff!"

A shot had just sounded down the street. It was an echoing report of a rifle that swelled over the town, reaching from one end of it to the other in a noise that was like a great mass of half-musical shale spilling down the ragged face of a towering cliff.

"The fun has started," said Bender.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Death Behind the Stove

JOHNSON had glanced on beyond the girl and happened to be looking out the window when the report of the shot came. He saw the puff of smoke at the southwest corner of the street. The smoke was there for only an instant before the morning breeze whipped it away. It was only a round ring that jerked from a narrow window on the third floor of a long-closed gray-stone building that had once been known far and wide as Diamond Joe Longstreet's Grand Palace Hotel.

The mines were worked-out, their once-tall tipples on the hillside fallen down or carted away, leaving only a broken timber or plank here and there. Only grass grew now on their rocky dumps, and the glitter and dash of the Grand Palace had gone with the mines.

When the shot crashed Lieutenant Snead was walking across the street from the Silver Dollar to the Grizzly Queen. Johnson saw him stop as if an invisible stone had struck him from behind. Snead staggered, left hand sweeping to his chest. There was almost five seconds of absolute silence marred by only the fading report of the rifle before fierce outbursts of yells came rushing up from either side of the street. Soldiers were running forward in that noise.

"Stay here until I get back—both of you!" Johnson shot that warning to the judge and the girl as he swung quickly from the desk and headed for the door. "This is one sneak-killer job of murder that's going to be tough to settle!"

He thought he heard the muffled report of a second shot when he reached the porch, but there was too much noise and excitement down the street for a man to be certain of anything. Lieutenant Snead was already down, slumped to his knees in the street with a soldier on one side of him and a big cowpuncher on the other, trying to help him to his feet. Others swirled in, seizing the wounded man by the feet and brushing the crowd aside as they hurried on with him toward Doc Kelly's office.

"Surround the Grand Palace!" John-

son yelled that warning as he raced down the street. "That's the place! The killer's on the top floor. Don't let him get away!"

There was but little need of the warning. There were others along the street who had seen that ring of smoke puff from the high window. A wild-eyed mob was already scattering and stringing forward, soldiers, cowboys and business men snarling and cursing as they rushed through the alleyways at either side of the hotel to cut off any possible avenue of retreat for the hidden gunman inside.

In a matter of seconds the place was surrounded, and troopers were hammering at the long-locked doors and boarded-up windows with the butts of their carbines to break their way inside.

It was a musty old den of cobwebs, dusty ghosts of once-rich hangings, and rat-gnawed and fallen-in upholstery when Johnson jammed his way into the dark lobby. He went in behind the blustering Sergeant Blandon and the noisy little group that had forced down the paint-scabbed front doors to allow long-barred sunshine to stream in like the powerful ray from a great searchlight.

"Hold it, sergeant, hold it!" cried Johnson. "Let's not make a mess of it! Stop everybody downstairs. If we don't we're liable to spoil our chances of getting our man. Stop them, I tell you!"

"Halt where ye are!" bellowed the big Irishman, pawing cobwebs from his face, then swinging back to Johnson. "And how are we to spoil it by everybody rushing right on up and catching the louse, sheriff?"

"By the dust on all the stairs," explained Johnson in a low voice. "I was

in here about a year ago. The dust on the stairs then was as thick as your thumb. There'll be tracks on those stairs. If we go rushing up in a wad we'll be apt to blot out everything."

"Aye, and I catch the point now." Blandon swung back to his men. "Take charge of the lower halls and rooms, Corporal Smith. See that nobody goes up—and, by hell, take charge of all the doors and windows and see that nobody goes out either!"

With six-shooters in their hands, Johnson and the sergeant moved on, heading up the main stairway, once a thing of frills and curves, covered with drapes and rich-red carpet, and now dust-covered and a runway for rats and all manner of crawling things. Johnson was leading the way, the impatient Irishman close behind him.

It was lighter on the second floor because the windows had not been boarded over here. The sheriff stopped, puzzled as he stared along the floor of a wide hall flanked by rooms with open doors at either side.

Dust on the carpet looked an inch-deep here. The only thing that marred it were the footprints of big rats and tracks here and there where gopher snakes had crawled in their hurried pursuits of mice.

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THE third floor was no better when Johnson reached it with the red-faced sergeant all but tramping on his heels. The carpet in the hall had the same layers of dust, the same rat and snake tracks. All the doors to the rooms



were open, the dusty furniture exactly as it had been left when Diamond Joe Longstreet packed his bags, nailed up, and left on the Southbound for the forty-mile run for the railroad at Dog Creek with a string of flaming beauties jamming the stage with him for the riches to be found in the heart of a big gold strike somewhere in Nevada.

"It was once a fine shack, hey?" Sergeant Blandon was gawking at everything in sight. "Faith, it must have cost thousands and thousands of dollars to rig out a swell joint like this, and they left everything standing as if just going away for overnight. Wonder why they didn't take all this stuff with them? It's still worth a pile of money, sheriff. Who owns the dump now?"

"Old Bank Rutledge did own it." Johnson had stopped, studying the floor of a room through an open door in front of him. "Got on one of his hell-twisting Christmas drunks, I'm told, and bought it from the bank across the street. It held the mortgage. Don't think Old Bank was ever inside of it after the night he bought it and pitched a big party for all the broken-down cowboys in the country.

"And as far as the original owner paying off the mortgage and taking away the furnishings—well," he shrugged and suppressed a wince from that wounded arm that was throbbing again, "transportation cost a lot of money in those days. As you probably already know, you can't buy a go-cart without a fortune when a gold strike hits anywhere within hundreds of miles from you. Do you see what I see? The man who shot your lieutenant fired from the broken pane in that window, just to the left of it. Look at the tracks in the dust."

"Be gob, and you're right, sheriff!" Blandon dropped to a stoop, big hands on his knees as he stared at the floor. "Fine boots he wore, too, I would say from the looks of the dainty heels."

"And more than that, sergeant." Johnson moved slowly forward and pointed to a spot on the floor that was not covered by the rug. "We'd better keep quiet about this for a little while."

"Quiet me eye!" Blandon's lips curled in a snarl, his Irish brogue thickened by sudden anger as he straightened with a

jerk. "Sam Snead might have been only a shave-tail not long out of his West Point, but he was one of the best men I've yet to ride under in my twenty-nine years in the damned army! Aye, young Snead was that, and all I want is me hands on the liver of the dirty buzzard who shot him.

"Sam Snead is in a bad way." He fired a quick glance over his shoulder at the hall, brows knitted into a bitter scowl. "I've seen too many men shot, a lot of them in my years in the service. There was blood on his back and his chest in the worst of places when the lad went down. I saw it, and all I want is the man who fired that shot. I'll pull the inwards out of him!"

"That's exactly why I want you to keep your mouth shut," nodded the sheriff. "We've got to get that killer for a lot of reasons. I want you to see that nobody comes upstairs. Look at this, closely. See right here? Our killer's boots are brand-new. He wears a pair of belled spurs with shanks about two and a half inches long. Look at those screws in the heel-taps, look at the set of the grooves—a perfect picture in the dust, sergeant."

"Aye, and they said you were a dumb young man, lad!" exclaimed the Irishman, breathlessly. "Now if the murdering booger had only laid down on his face we'd have the tin-type complete."

"Near complete without it." Johnson grinned up at him. "If we'll keep our mouths shut when we get back downstairs we are certain to get our man. Our killer not only left his boot tracks. He left his spur tracks, and the rowel in his right spur is missing!"

"I'll be blasted, sir!" The Irishman twisted his face into a broad, ugly grin. "And they said you didn't have brains enough to come in out of the rain. Somebody lied about you, Tennessee Bill."

"Sergeant Blandon! Sergeant Blandon!" The voice came roaring up from below. "We've found the killer! He shot himself behind the kitchen stove down here!"

"An' who the hell woulda thunk it!" bellowed up another excited man's voice. "Who'd athunk it! Damn 'f it ain't Ol' Dan Landy—deader'n all hell with the lights shot out!"

"Hold it, sergeant!" Johnson caught him by the arm as Blandon wheeled. "I think we're going to find a lie staring at us downstairs. Dan Landy's a mean old devil when he's in a fighting notion, but there are not soldiers and sheep enough in Montana to make him shoot a man in the back."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Gun Thunder

THE body of Old Dan Landy was there, limply flung over on its right side behind the enormous black stove and the cobwebbed wall in the northwest corner of the kitchen. The order that nobody was to follow Johnson and the sergeant upstairs had saved the evidence in that part of the hotel. The order still stood, but one should have been given here. An unthinking mob rushing in like stampeding sheep had jammed into the kitchen, blotting out tracks that were certainly there before them.

A glance or two behind the stove was enough to tell that the old cattleman had been shot through the left side of the head. His old Colt lay on the floor beside him, mute evidence that one shot had been fired from it when Johnson picked it up. He wiped the blood from it on his handkerchief, and thrust the weapon down inside the bosom of his shirt. Still using the soiled handkerchief, he wiped dry the round hole in the white-haired head. The sergeant was bending over him, watching intently.

"Powder burned, all right." Ben Crow spoke in a husky whisper at the edge of the jammed-back crowd. "I made it a point to sorter wipe him off and' look for that, myself, Tennessee. I never thought Dan would shoot a man from behind. Don't think he did yet, Tennessee. I ain't goin' to believe that he did—"

"Until, I reckon," sneered a tall, sharp-faced man in the crowd, "he comes back to life an' tells yuh he did! This is plain enough to me, but maybe I ain't one of the old-timers in these parts who'd like to cover up the cold-blooded shootin' of a fine soldier by one of my friends."

"Why, yuh hoss-thief snake!" Crow

wheeled with a wicked glint in his mean old eyes. "I'll fight yuh or any man livin' over that!"

"Stop it, Ben!" Johnson caught him just in time. "I hate to believe that myself, but the evidence is pretty strong against my opinion when I look at Old Dan. You'll stay with us, Ben. I believe the sergeant wants to clear out the rest of the crowd."

"Sure, sure—outside with 'em, Corporal Smith!" boomed the sergeant as if drilling an entire troop of cavalry. "We'll get the old man's body across the street after we're through with it. Move out, all of you! The army's taking over right now."

"Look here, Johnson, you can't brow-beat me through the sergeant!" Big Dunk Rutledge had come back from somewhere. "You can't have me tossed off or out of my own property by crooking Blandon under your thumb. I own this old hotel. I own a lot more property around here. All these soldiers know I am their friend."

"They've had to come here to protect honest people who have an honest right to protection under the law. That's all I've ever asked for. There's not a soldier in this valley who can't have my shirt. Damn it, I'm not making trouble, corporal!"

His voice lifted to a shriek. "I—I'm a friend, I tell you! *Keep away from me!* Get your hands off of me! I won't stand to be treated like a dog even if I am the best friend a soldier's got in the country. Don't do that!" There was a short scuffle, a grunt of surprise, then: "All right, *all right!* You don't need to punch a hole through my belly with that damned carbine! Steel, you and O'Reilly help me. You fellows are United States deputy marshals—"

"Yeah, we know that," snarled back Joshua D. Steel's low voice, "but this crowd don't seem to mind it. Can't you see these fool soldiers have guns in our ribs, too?"

It was the good riddance of the blustering and threatening Big Dunk for the moment. He went out roaring, prodded along on the end of a carbine's muzzle all the way to the front door and the planked walk beyond it. Tennessee Johnson was not fooled by such horse-play. Dunk Rut-

ledge would be back. The mere fact that Lieutenant Sam Snead had ordered him to leave town had not daunted him for long. His noisy outburst here had a sinister purpose behind it, and it was not a hard one to understand.

Dunk Rutledge was out to rub raw every nerve he could possibly reach. The shooting of Snead had been for the same thing—an act to make the soldiers boil with rage. If that rage could be exploded into action by the backing of whiskey that might be slipped to some of the hard-drinkers in the lot, then the flames of a furious fight might be fanned into an inferno. Twin Creek Valley men would not suffer in such a fight. The cattle crowd would catch the worst of it.

"Big Dunk's nobody's fool," explained Johnson as he talked of it when the hotel was cleared. "Planted evidence can bend men the way you want them bent. Somebody figured it out that the body of Old Dan lying here would be positive proof that the cow crowd shot Sneak. But look at the old fellow's boots, and think of the tracks upstairs."

"The boots were the first thing I looked at." The sergeant scowled, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "No run-over heels made the tracks above us. But—where do we go from here?"

"Back upstairs. Stay with the body, Ben, and quit looking so sullen about what I said about the evidence being against old Dan!"

"No hard feelin's, Tennessee!" Crow tried to grin. "What yuh said at first hit me square betwix the eyes, an' then I knowed yuh was just lyin' for somebody else's ear. Go ahead. I'll take care of things here!"



JOHNSON again led the way, this time up a musty old rear stairway filled with cobwebs. Only surprise waited for them when they reached the room from which the rifle shot had been fired. Rags of covering had been dragged off the bed and swept back and forth across the floor. They followed the broad trail of the sweepings into another room toward the front of the hotel, then into a second and a third room. Here the trail

came to an end against a low window where the rags from the bed had been dropped on the floor.

"This is a blinded trail, sergeant!" Johnson turned and grimly looked at the big Irishman. "I think I'm beginning to catch the point. Old-timers in this country still remember a lot about the Grand Palace. Diamond Joe Longstreet and his women didn't always get their money off the gambling tables and the dance floors.

"A lot of people in the past were known to go to bed dead-drunk and wake up the next morning with their pockets empty. The usual hotel sign with a slight addition for its time is down there in the lobby. It says, 'We are not responsible for lost valuables unless they are registered at the desk and a receipt taken for the same.' I'm told that people sometimes followed all the rules, and yet they awoke next morning without their receipts. These walls are thick enough for hidden passageways—"

"But," cut in the sergeant, "what has that to do with this case? How did the old cowman happen to get into the hotel, and how did—"

"Not so fast!" Johnson chopped him off abruptly. "We don't know a hell of a lot of anything just yet, but you can bet that somebody, somewhere, was listening when they discovered the tracks and were talking about them. I left Old Dan Landy in the Silver Dollar. We'll have to try to pick up his trail from there. But, first, we'll try to see what we can find up here."

They started back for the first room. Before they were gone ten feet a noise stopped them. A ballooning sound had come up from below, a deep, rumbling roar that swelled through the dingy rooms and musty halls in a reverberating thunder. A cry of terror arose with that first shocking sound. Another roar followed the fierce cry, the noise again repeating thunder rocking from hall to hall, room to room like a spasmodic outburst of mocking laughter.

"That yell came from Ben Crow!" said Johnson. "Come on, soldier!"

Ben Crow was down in a crouch against the jamb of the door with a six-shooter in his right hand when they rushed into the kitchen with Blandon yelling for Corporal Smith. "He shot me outa that cup-

board, Tennessee." Crow's left hand was thrust across his body and gripped against his right side with blood showing through his fingers. "Busted some ribs, maybe. I got one shot at him, an' I think I hit him. Better be mighty careful. I heard him fall down somethin'."

The cupboard door against the wide east wall of the kitchen was still cracked open. Johnson flung the door wide, and stepped back, staring as Smith came galloping in, followed by a lance-corporal. Both were receiving a string of orders from Blandon in rapid-fire army fashion. The corporal turned, yelling for two more men to come in and carry out the wounded Crow.

"Make a light of some kind and follow me!" snapped the sheriff. "It's dark as the devil's tomb ahead."

A panel in the rear wall of the cupboard hung open at a lop-sided angle as if grasping hands had torn it from its hidden rusty hinges. A dark stairway ran up in the wall to the right. Another narrow stairway ran down to the left. Calling another order to the sergeant over his shoulder, Johnson started down, having to feel his way in the darkness.

It was not dark for very long on that old stairway. A shot suddenly roared below, its bullet slapping along the wall. Johnson went down in a crouch, one yard-long blaze after another tearing from the muzzle of the big Colt in his right hand as he fired back at the place where the ribbon of light had lurched toward him. A man's voice, hoarse with pain, came up to him in a sound that might have been made by a bawling calf:

"Don't—damn it!"

Johnson slid on, six-shooter still ready, the sound of a sobbing voice leading him now. He reached the foot of the steps. The sobbing voice was no more than a yard ahead of him when he stopped.

"I—I can see yuh," groaned the man just ahead. "There's some light behind yuh. The old devil got me, bad. Whole left hip feels like it's been shot off. I'm—I'm gonna die!"

"Better die here than on a rope." Johnson was thinking rapidly, seeing a rat in a trap here that would talk if prodded just right. "We're going to have a hard time holding the mob in the street. You killed the wrong man when you shot Lieutenant Sam Snead."

"I'm goin' to die!" The man was groaning again. "Oh, I'm gonna die! I wish to hell I'd stayed in Dog Creek!"

"You'll talk better than that if you want to keep the mob off of you." Johnson was going after him mercilessly when Blandon and Corporal Smith came with a smoky old oil lamp one of the soldiers had brought from somewhere. "Big Dunk won't save your neck when his own neck's at stake. Hold that lamp close, sergeant. Let's take a look at the heels of his boots and his spurs."

"I—I made them tracks upstairs." The wounded man's sudden confession was a surprise. "I was in the wall an' heard yuh two talkin'. But—but I ain't the only one, no, I ain't." He tried to rear to his elbow, a big, rusty-haired fellow, one that Johnson had seen two or three times with Dunk Rutledge of late. "We come in sorter behind the others atter we'd got Mink Patton down outa that tree where the dogs chased him. We come in the back

NEW SUCCESS OVER ATHLETE'S FOOT

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way for this job. Out there in the storehouse in back is where we found the old man, though it wasn't me who shot him with his own gun. He was sicker'n a buzzard from some drinks he'd took on an empty stomach, he said. We knowed he would tell he saw us in that ol' house. Mink thought quick—

"Lord!"

A shot had come roaring out of the darkness to their left. The place they were in now was no more than a big basement. Smith doubled backward, giving the old lamp a jerk, the jerk and the concussion of the sudden shot whipping out the flame just as Johnson's six-shooter roared with another yard-long flame that leaped toward the flash of the unexpected shot from the darkness.

"I'm hit, sergeant!" Smith was going down, voice gasping desperately for breath and words, one hand to his body, the other still holding the lamp. "Hit low, through the stomach."

Johnson had already whipped out his second six-shooter and was rushing forward, still firing. Booted feet banged on stairs ahead of him.



A HALF-ROTTED old trap-door was flung up, letting light come down as the figure of a man sped upward through the opening. Johnson slid to a halt and fired again. A yell rewarded him, and he was plunging on with the sergeant now at his heels and cursing like a pirate.

Mink Patton's bulky figure was there ahead of them, a hatless, white-faced thing. Six-shooters dropped at the head of the stairway, he was trying to crawl straight on, but his left leg dragged, smearing a crooked line behind him. A charging two-legged bull gone crazy as hell, Johnson raced on. He drove both feet in the man's back and flattened him on the floor just as a burst of shots and yells came from the direction of the street. . . .

A new hell was breaking loose from all directions when Johnson and the sergeant reached the street. Cowpunchers were carrying the moaning and cursing Mink Patton. Soldiers called down into the

basement before Blandon left it had already carried Corporal Smith and the wounded gunman out of the hotel. Smith was silent, grim-lipped as they took him into Kelly's office.

The wounded gunman—shrieking with almost unbearable pain—had been dropped flat on his back on the walk in front of the doctor's to start howling his head off for Big Dunk Rutledge. His voice was still rolling up and down the street in frantic cries:

"Yo've got to get me outa this, Dunk. Ever'body's talkin' about hangin' me! These soldiers are talkin' it! That shave-tail officer's dead. They're killin' wild, Dunk! Don't you let 'em try hangin' me! I'll talk, *Ill talk!*"

"String 'im up!" The roar seemed to come from every man in the big crowd that had jammed forward. "String him up!"

"Damn yuh, Dunk!" A screech of terror that was like a sharp whistle now came from the gunman. "Stop 'em! *Stop 'em!* Yuh an' Mink Patton killed ol' Bank Rutledge. Yuh shot him in his bed with his own gun that Saturday night when his riders was in town—*Yuh devil!*"

A shot had thundered down on the east side of the street. It came from the upstairs bay-window of a little two-story red-brick. A bullet grazed the wounded gunman's chest. Going on it hit the planks of the walk and glanced upward, catching a soldier in the thigh.

When the soldier staggered back and fell it was the last straw. The devil could not have held that mob. Carbines came up, fire jerking, the splintering reports of shots filling the street. Swarms of cowboys had come into town. They were into it now, and the upper floor of the red-brick was not the only target. Twin Creek Valley gunmen had been steadily appearing in Buckaroo. Now they were all running for their horses, trying to get out of town. Some of them were making it, others were stopping, staggering and falling. The rest were like panic-stricken apes trying to crawl into holes and bury themselves from sight. No one ever did know what became of Marshal Tim O'Reilly and Joshua D. Steel, but it was a certainty that they managed their own quick sneak-away.

Johnson had wheeled. He was yelling at the gone-crazy mobs as he raced down the street, but the mobs were ignoring him. At least forty men were pouring lead into the red-brick now. In spite of that terrible hail shots gashed back from broken windows, the bullets smashing around Johnson's feet.

"Cease firing!" Sergeant Blandon was yelling. "*Cease firing!* The sheriff is going in after Rutledge. *You can't hang a dead man!* Let Tennessee Bill drag him out!"

A cheer lifted, the shots dying away. Johnson had reached the front of the red-brick when the last shot came from the mobs. He kicked open a door at the foot of a flight of stairs. Throwing a shot ahead of him from each hand, he started up. Somebody fell above him, swore in a screech. Then silence.

Cocked six-guns up, Johnson never hesitated. He walked on, head thrown back so that he could see above him, the stairs squeaking. He reached a point four feet below the last step and dropped into a crouch, listening. The sounds of a deep, painful breathing came to him. Lifting his weapons and slamming two shots ahead of him, he was suddenly clearing the rest of the way up the steps with a wild yell.

It was a split-second's surprise when he saw only one man in the room—a big, barrel-bellied, bushy-haired man with wide black eyebrows and a bulldog face. The man was to his left sitting behind a desk against the thick wall. It was Judge Robert Light, dabbing at his chin with a bloody handkerchief. Light spoke, voice

a wheeze as he jabbed his thumb, toward the southeast corner of the room.

"He's in that closet, sheriff."

The closet door flew open, an oath behind it. A white-faced, wide-eyed thing stood there, a six-shooter suddenly blazing. Johnson fired twice. Big Dunk Rutledge's head snapped back at the first shot. Only one eye glaring now! That eye stopped glaring at the sound of the second shot, spurting red took its place before he could fall and the sheriff could speak:

"Just as I promised you, Dunk!"

"The fool shot me, sheriff." Light seemed to be slowly wilting in his chair. "He thought I could issue another order and the soldiers would still carry it out. I—heard about the girl coming. Rightful heir, of course. It looks like your crackpot Bullet Head Bender—will take over from here. I went beyond all my authority—put my bet on the wrong side this time. If we'd had anybody but an ass like Dunk it might not have backfired. The girl can sell those damned sheep to some sheep outfit. Nice bunch. The Bad Water can't stop her. There's evidence in my safe to show how they were behind this fraud. It was my hole-card. Tell—Bender—that."

It was the end of him. He slumped lower, then buckled face-forward on the desk. Feet were already pounding on the stairs, and men were pushing and crowding into the room. Johnson turned. Sergeant Blandon could handle this for a little while. There was a girl and Bullet Head Hank Bender waiting up the street to hear the good news. . .

THE END



ORPHAN OF THE GUN STORM

By M. HOWARD LANE

"I'll show you why Banion wants the *Jornado*!"



"Santa Fe—or bust!" was young O'Shannon's battle cry. For his trailside inheritance from his dead father was a Murphy wagon loaded with stoves. But there were powerful forces working against him within the wagon train—hell-bent on making sure that neither stoves nor train ever reached Santa Fe!

SABBATH O'SHANNON was the boy's name. He came into Council Grove with nothing but heaviness in his heart and a load of stoves bound for Santa Fe in the deep belly of his Murphy wagon.

He was heavy of heart because he had buried his mother and father in trail side graves part way between Independence

and this rendezvous where the Santa Fe caravans gathered.

The brave hopes he had entertained tasted like ashes in his mouth now. Oh, those in the camp where the graves had been dug had expressed their sympathy for him, but young Sabbath O'Shannon, just turning eighteen, had seen the envious glances more than one man had turned on his spanking new Murphy wagon and the five span of matched Missouri mules that labored in its traces.

That Santa Fe trader, Treet Banion, had been the most persistent in his attempt to get the young Missourian to part with all he had left in the world.

"Stoves?" he had said. "Stoves for Santa Fe? Why, son, I don't like to speak ill of the dead, but your father must have been a mighty foolish man to think he could sell any part of 'em in New Mexico. The natives have been getting along without them for a long time now. They don't need stoves."

"New Mexico is part of the United States now," Sabbath had reminded the trader. "Have you forgotten, maybe, that Colonel Kearney has the Stars and Stripes flying over Santa Fe's plaza? My dad knew a lot of folks like us would be heading for that new land to build homes. Maybe the natives don't need stoves, but dad figured a lot of Yanks would be powerful glad to buy them."

So, he had come on, alone. And now the matched Missouri mules were pulling the big Murphy wagon into the richly timbered strip along Council Grove Creek. In spite of himself, Sabbath felt some of the excitement that always pervaded this trail's-end and trail's-beginning camp, seep into his body.

There were wagons here galore. Dozens of them, held up because heavy rains had raised many yonder creeks and rivers to a point where prairie schooners couldn't ford them. People were swarming all over the encampment. There was the pleasant fragrance of smoke rising from evening cook-fires.

Sabbath headed for an open camp-site across the trampled square in the center of the Grove. Small boys were frolicking about, whooping like Indians. Sabbath hoped they would never meet. Beaver-hatted gamblers with long cheroots be-

tween their lips strolled elegantly amongst buckskinned trappers and emigrants. Yes, this Council Grove was certainly some place, the Missouri boy reflected. He was glad to be here. The spirit of the camp made him feel good.

Then some of his pleasure vanished. A tall man garbed in the respectable black of a prosperous Santa Fe trader, spotted his wagon and left the group of muleteers with whom he had been talking. Sabbath recognized Treet Banion and reined in. He knew what Banion wanted and there was just no time like now to get things straightened out.

The trader stopped at the off front wheel. He took the long cigar from between his white teeth. He was a dark, confident man, always clean-shaven and somehow immaculate. Dust and dirt and axle grease just seemed to stay away from him. Sabbath hadn't liked him from the first time they'd met on the way here from Independence.

Treet Banion studied the long, youthful shape on the wagon seat above him. The boy was eighteen, and time would put meat on his bony frame. It would fill out his thin, sparsely freckled face. But time would not change the stubborn set of his wide lips, nor dim the directness of his gray-green eyes.

"So you've made it this far, O'Shannon," the trader greeted pleasantly. "Right nice going, son, but I still think your outfit is too big for a youngster like you to handle."

"I ain't a kid, Mr. Banion," Sabbath said soberly. "Maybe I had to grow up overnight, but my dad started for Santa Fe with a load of stoves, and I'm goin' to see they get there!"

He lifted the reins. The mules tightened the straps obediently. Treet Banion had to move his foot in a hurry to keep an iron-tired wheel from rolling across his instep.

The trader looked after the wagon and there was a thoughtful expression on his face. Slowly he returned his cheroot to his lips, moved back to the men with whom he had been talking. Part of them handled the five freighters Treet Banion was trailing to Santa Fe. The rest were carefully picked and always ready to listen to a proposition.

SABBATH O'SHANNON tooled his big wagon expertly into the empty campsite he had spotted. He cared for his mules, kindled a small fire that would soon burn down to cooking coals. Then he picked a wooden water bucket from beneath the bulging belly of the Murphy wagon and headed for the creek.

Yes, the Grove was certainly some place. Most everybody was here, it seemed, from Yellowstone trappers to the scum of creation. And they were all intent on reaching Santa Fe now that Colonel Kearney had the Stars and Stripes flapping above the Governor's Palace. Yes, there would be a place for stoves in Santa Fe.

Thinking as he was, Sabbath paid little attention to his feet as he followed the well-worn path down to the creek. His toe caught a root and he all but sprawled forward on his face. A girl's tinkling laughter spurred his recovery.

"It's a good thing you're carrying an empty pail instead of a full one," she said.

Sabbath found his feet. A flush that started along his neck rose to meet the line of his sandy hair. He caught a confused glimpse of laughing red lips, hair the color of taffy. The girl was tall and her young body gave promise of loveliness when it reached maturity. Her blue eyes were smiling at him. Sabbath O'Shannon felt like a fool.

She had two full water-buckets and their weight was more than a girl should carry. He tossed his own bucket into a thicket alongside the path and reached for the girl's burden. "Ain't right you should have to carry those," he said gruffly. "Where's your menfolks?"

It had been the wrong question. Sabbath saw the girl's eye squeeze shut for just an instant, and some inner pain tortured her lips.

"We—we haven't any," she said with an effort. She tried to smile. "It was so damp at Westport Landing where we outfitted that dad caught a terrible cold. It turned into pneumonia. He—he died on the trail here. Now there's just me and mother, so I have to carry the water."

"You're lucky you still have your mom," Sabbath said stiffly. His own features twisted.

The girl's hand timidly touched his arm as he turned back up the trail with her buckets. "You—you mean—"

"Dad and Mom, both," Sabbath told her. "But I'm going to Santa Fe just the same. I know they'd want me to."

The girl's camp, he found, was just one removed from his own, and later as he warmed his own small meal above the coals of his cook-fire, he saw that he could look right into their camp by peering beneath the deep belly of the heavy Murphy wagon.

The girl's name was Sharon Brownell. She had introduced him to her mother, a small, solid woman who looked as though she would never smile again. And yet they were determined to go into that new land beyond the prairie.

"If two women can make it," Sabbath muttered, as he scrubbed a fry-pan clean with sand and water, "I sure can, too."

There was just one thing to do now, and that was wait until the rivers dropped and a caravan organized. One that would include the Brownells and a greenhorn kid from Missouri with a load of stoves in the belly of his Murphy wagon.

A man's legs moved into the fire-lit Brownell camp. Sharon's wide skirts rustled toward him. Sabbath craned his neck to see who that man might be and he felt a little hot around the collar. Then he recognized Treet Banion. The trader was talking earnestly to the girl and her mother.

Pretty soon, Sabbath saw Banion tip his wide black hat politely, and then he got a second surprise. The trader was coming toward his Murphy wagon with long confident strides. He came around the tail-gate and stood tall above the Missouri boy.

"O'Shannon," he said easily. "We're holding a meeting tonight in the square to elect officers for a caravan that I expect will be pulling out within a few days. You'll be welcome to join it, if I'm elected captain. Of course if someone else wins the vote, they might object to including a pair of lone women and one kid."

Sabbath felt his thin nostrils flare. "I figger I know what you mean, Banion," he said flatly.

"I figure you do, too," the trader said coolly.

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SABBATH walked to the meeting with Sharon and her mother. The girl put her hand through the crook of his arm and Sabbath was glad he had donned his best butternut shirt for this occasion.

"You can feel the excitement in the air," Sharon said. "Just imagine, we're going to Santa Fe!"

"We ain't there yet," Sabbath told her.

A good hundred people were gathered in a circle about the council fire. Sabbath watched their faces shining in the red light. Men and women alike were eager for the prairie crossing that lay ahead. He felt the girl tremble against him. She was

nominatin' Beaver-tail Bragg. Ain't a man knows the mountains nor plains 'tween here and Taos any better. And there ain't a feller from the Yellerstone to Westport Landing any easier for folks to git along with. Beaver-tail, step out and let folks have a squint at you."

A little, clean-shaven man in buckskins smoke-blackened by many fires, stepped into the clear. His jaws moved rhythmically on a cud of tobacco. His long brown hair swept to the fringed collar of his beaded hunting shirt. He looked ageless as the plains themselves.

He spoke without raising his voice and yet the soft tones had a carrying quality all their own. "I got me only one wagon, and I ain't rich enough to pay no driver

Rich were the stakes for which these Santa Fe freighters, like young O'Shannon in this story, risked their lives. No less colorful, perilous or rich was the gamble made by miners in the raw, lusty gold-camps of old California! Don't miss Harry F. Olmsted's novel of boom-camp renegades, "Last Run of the Snowshoe Express," in the current STAR WESTERN. Buy it today!

eager too, and, he guessed, a little afraid.

A brawny, red-bearded man in the rough corduroy and heavy boots of a teamster leaped to the top of a packing case beside the fire. More than one horn of whiskey had obviously oiled his tongue.

"Ladies and gents," he proclaimed, "I ain't a man to beat about the bush. Let's elect ourselves a captain and then turn the meetin' over to him. Ain't but one man handy in this crowd with the experience to lead a caravan to Santa Fe. That feller is Treet Banion! He's got more at stake than any of yuh. Five wagons wear his name and you can bet your last dollar he ain't hankerin' to have Injuns or any of those danged *Comancheros* we've heerd tell about, steal the cavy or burn his gear. If anybody else has got a cand-di-date, I'd like to hear him named."

For a moment, Sabbath thought there would be no other candidate named. Then from a tight group of plainsmen to one side, an anonymous voice drawled: "'Pears to me a feller who's scalped his share of redskins and rid these plains from end-to-end would make a better wagon boss than airy trader. I'm for

fifty and found. 'Pears to me like the man with the biggest investment is your best bet for bossin' the show," he said mildly.

Tension, Sabbath noticed, had come into the big red-bearded teamster on the packing case. Now he relaxed. "Folks," his bellow beat into the ears of his listeners, "let's take Bragg's advice without no more palaver, and app'int Treet Banion cap'n by acclaim. Are you ready for the vote?"

"Aye!" the emigrants chorused. Sabbath found his own voice giving the assent he had promised.

The trader stepped from the ranks. He was immaculate as ever. He leaped with cat-like nimbleness to the box. "Thank you, friends," he said crisply. "My *compadre* here," he put his hand on the red-beard's arm, "seems to have given you folks a little wrong notion about me. This is my fourth jaunt to Santa Fe. Not my first. We'll have no trouble on the trip if we are vigilant every step of the way. That makes the selection of your Commander of the Guard a careful chore. I would suggest my friend here," again he touched the red-beard's arm. "To those

of you who don't know him, this is Pike Phillips. A handier man with a hog-laig ain't to be found—"

Sabbath heard a voice speak up beside him. For a moment he could hardly believe that he was listening to the emigrant girl, Sharon. She was saying: "I don't know just what you call a 'hog-laig,' Mr. Banion, but if the post of Commander of the Guard is so important, I should think it should be held by a man with courage above all else. I propose Sabbath O'Shannon for the post. He is young, but he has the courage to carry on after losing both his father and mother on the way here."

Sabbath found Treet Banion's amused black eyes looking straight at him. He felt a hot prickling start at the base of his spine and run to his neck. He had to say something, he realized, because a lot of other eyes had turned toward him. Some of the men were openly grinning. Others weren't.

He moved a pace into the open and it was the hardest step he had ever taken in his life. "I—I ain't hankerin' for glory," he blurted. It seemed to him that his sandy hair was standing straight on end. "There's lots better men than me in this outfit. Mebbe Mr. Bragg might be willin' to take the chore. All I want to do is my share of work and fightin' till we see Santa Fe!"

Something in the nature of a ragged cheer broke from many throats, and he heard some exclamations that made his ears burn. "That kid's all right," some were saying. . . . "Got the stuff in him." . . . There were other remarks, but Sabbath had turned his thin, burning face to Sharon Brownell.

"Women," he said bitterly, "shore know how to make a fool out of a man!"

Blindly pushing, he got out of the crowd, tramped back to his wagon. But he couldn't forget Sharon's proud face going suddenly white, just as though he'd slapped her.



AND that memory was something Sabbath O'Shannon found that he couldn't forget in the kaleidoscopic days and weeks that followed. It soon became routine to catch-up and stretch-out

the train in the mornings and the first night's camp had been barely pitched when Banion's Commander of the Guard, the red-beard Phillips, came to the Murphy wagon.

"Your gal seemed to think you'd make a right courageous guard," he had drawled. "So we're goin' to give you the fust chance out of the box. We're dividin' the men into bunches and they'll all share shift and shift alike. Treet, he's done taken a liking to you, so you git the early trick from eight to twelve. 'Course you'll miss out on the evenin' sing which makes folks fergit how tired they be. But you're young. You can stand that."

"Won't the shifts change every week or two?" Sabbath had asked.

"Oh, shore, shore," Phillips assured him. "Don't worry none about that. Jest you keep your eyes peeled for skulkin' reds when you're outside the wagon square."

That had been weeks ago. The days and nights had weaved their endless pattern one into another for the Missouri boy as the wagons wound their slow way westward across the vast plains of Kansas. He hadn't wanted a change of shift just so he could stroll in the evenings with Sharon Brownell, he told himself stubbornly. Yet it didn't seem quite right to see her so often with Treet Banion when the evening sings began.

They had put his wagon near the end of the mile-long caravan line and Sabbath had eaten dust uncomplainingly. So had the quiet plainsman, Beaver-tail Bragg, and more than once O'Shannon had caught the man's steady eyes studying him enigmatically.

But he was hoping for some answer this evening as he watched the plainsman step toward him through the Kansas dusk. Beaver-tail Bragg came from his wagon and hunkered down beside the Missouri boy's cook-fire.

He spat carefully into the coals, murmured: "Son, I've had my eyes on ye for quite some time. I've watched ye grow up since we've left Council Grove. You're most a man now. Will be, likely, by the time ye've spilled a little blood 'tween here and Santy Fe."

Sabbath looked at the calm-faced scout. His brow furrow. "Blood?" he said. "I

ain't hankerin' to spill any man's blood, mister."

"You want to deliver a wagon-full of stoves to Santa Fe, don't you?" Bragg asked quietly.

Sabbath nodded, still puzzled.

"*Bueno*," the scout remarked. "I'd like to see ye do it. You'll clean up a scad, if you git 'em there."

Sabbath drew a deep breath. Perhaps he had done some growing on the thousand miles that lay behind them. At least he had learned to talk up. "You want somethin', Mister," he said bluntly. "What is it?"

Beaver-tail Bragg spat into the fire. "We're coming to the edge of the Cimarron Desert tomorrow. There's three crossings and the choice of which one we take will be up to Treet Banion. He'll call a meeting tomorrow night when camp's set, at Mulberry Creek. Our bivouac will be so located that the guards can 'tend the gatherin' without much fear of reds sneak-in' up on us. According to the articles every one of us has got to vote to settle situations like this. So be it.

"Now, son," the scout laid his hand on Sabbath's knee, "as I said, thar's three trails across the Cimarron. The old route bends south across the *Jornado del Muerto*—the Journey of Death, some calls it. The second is the Cimarron cut-off. It's the shortest way to Glorieta Pass and Santa Fe. The Upper route, howsomever, is the best. Thar's wood and water and buffers galore. Takes more time, but ye're almost sartin of gittin' there.

"That's the lay-out, O'Shannon." The scout's voice was soft and earnest. "Now Banion's got this outfit in the palm of his hand. They'll vote his choice. If he picks the *Jornado*, it means we're journeying to death and don't mistake it."

The scout's face was grave. Sabbath waited for him to go on. He looked at Beaver-tail Bragg, saw the man's lips stiffen like iron. Molten words dripped from them.

"Colonel Kearney," he said, "lifted our flag over Santa Fe's plaza but he was only able to leave a handful of soldiers to keep the peace while he and the rest of his First Dragons moved on to Californy. There aren't enough of them to hunt down the Comancheros hauntin' the *Jornado*. Cuss-

es that are so ornery the Comanche Injuns cain't stand 'em. Plenty of 'em are New Mexicans who don't think much of our flag. The rest are renegade whites and the scum of every Injun tribe this side of the Canadian. There's just one thing they need to retake New Mexico, and red-den a lot of good soil with plenty of innocent blood."

"Which is?" Sabbath asked. He had that queer tingling along his spine again. It seemed to him that he was sitting here, listening to history being made.

"Guns!" the scout said. His voice sounded like chunks of ice being ground together. "Five wagon loads would be enough!"



SABBATH drew a deep breath. Treet Banion had five wagons. He began to understand a few things but there were still some questions unanswered in his mind.

"You seem to know a powerful lot, mister," he said carefully.

"I do," Beaver-tail Bragg drawled. "The Army knows those guns have been sold and they commissioned me to find 'em. That's one reason I couldn't run ag'in Banion when it come to votin' on a Capt'n and Commander of the Guard. Give 'em enough rope, sometimes, and they hang theirselves. I ain't seen the inside of his wagons, but if he sways the vote to the *Jornado de Muerto*, it'll be enough to know, account of that's whar the *Comancheros* hang their hats.

"Son," his deep-set eyes took on a sudden glow. "I ain't going to let better'n a hundred emigrants die just so's Banion can equip an army to drag our flag from the Presidio masthead. I want to know if you feel the same about that as me?"

Sabbath O'Shannon drew a deep breath. He stared for a time into the fading coals of his cook-fire. He had thought that the death of his father and mother had been the most real thing that had ever touched his life. But he knew now that he had been wrong. Death wiped a man's slate clean. Life was what counted. While a man lived, his duty was to the living. He thought of Sharon Brownell and what *Comancheros* would do to her

young beauty. He drew another tight breath.

"Name your game, mister," he said quietly.

Beaver-tail chuckled, but the sound carried no mirth. "If this party takes the Upper Crossing, it will reach Glorieta Pass and Santa Fe safe as a papoose wrapped in flannel. Our chore is to slant 'em along that route."

"Them and Banion's guns," Sabbath said slowly. "Might be our Army could even put 'em to use. But how you goin' to do it? He's got a powerful tough bunch of teamsters and drovers handling his wagons and they'll fight for him if you drop your hat."

"You got eyes," the scout said approvingly, "and brains, but not many yet, son. Howsomever, you got somethin' Banion wants powerful bad."

"And that?" Sabbath asked, puzzled.

"Stoves!" Beaver-tail Bragg all but chuckled. "They'll pay back their weight in gold in Santa Fe. That's why Banion has been trying to buy your outfit. When he couldn't do that, next best thing was to bring you along, figgerin' he'd get what he wanted for nothing when the Comancheros jumped us. So, son, you got nothing to lose by playing this hand my way."

Sabbath felt an unaccustomed quiver pass through his body at the mention of his precious cargo. Then he thought of Sharon and all the rest who were staking their future on this prairie passage to Santa Fe.

"You name it, mister," he said briefly.

The scout nodded. "When Banion tries to swing the vote to the *Jornado*, rear right up and offer him yore outfit for nothin', if he'll take the Upper Trace. We've got to bring things into the open, son, and it's the best way I know of doin' it. He'll refuse you. Then you'll have the right to reason why, out loud. Folks are goin' to listen to you, after what your gal had to say in Council Grove."

"Sharon Brownell," Sabbath said stiffly, "is not my girl!"

"She walks with Banion," the scout chuckled, "and talks about you. Son, I know! Play this hand right and we may spill some blood but it's better than gettin' a hundred folks scalped on the *Jornado* and seein' our flag drug in the dirt

of Santa Fe's plaza! It sure is, son!"

Sabbath went out to his guard post at the appointed time, but the shift passed like a dream. So did the next hot, dusty day. Five wagon loads of guns would be enough to gain an empire for an ambitious man. It was a hard thing to believe, and yet Sabbath could not deny the brutal truth.

Waiting was the hard part, waiting for evening and the line of trees that marked Mulberry Creek.

But finally the day was ended. Pike Phillips came past the individual cookfires of caravan members and left the same word with each. "We're meetin' to-night after supper to decide which Trace we'll foller from here to Santy Fe. Treet's in favor of the *Jornado*, but of course it will be up to you to cast your own vote."

Sabbath heard the redbeard out, watched him pass on. He knew that the game was going as Beaver-tail Bragg had said it would.

Then for the first time in long weeks he approached the community fire where the company gathered nightly to sing and discuss the happenings of the day. On the way, he marked out the five wagons belonging to Banion. A hired teamster idled beside each of them and now he understood their vigilance. They wanted no man to examine the crates inside the boxes of those wagons.

He saw Sharon across the council fire, standing beside the tall caravan-leader. He hardened his heart against every remembered line of her body and face. She'd made her choice. Let her keep it. Maybe she'd be a surprised girl before the evening was out.

BEAVER-TAIL BRAGG was across the fire, too. He was standing near the girl. The rest of the company were formed in a circle about the council blaze, and they were mostly silent. Sabbath felt his mouth go dry. It seemed to him that everybody was looking his way, but he knew the thought was a foolish one.

Treet Banion was moving slowly forward now.

"Friends!" His voice carried to all the assembled company. "We have come to the Cimarron and fortune has followed

our wagons this far. Indians have made no attacks. With luck we should complete our prairie passage without undue hardship or interference. Now I have always been a man who believes the shortest way to your goal is the best way. We have had rains which have, undoubtedly, replenished sink-holes and springs across the *Jornado de Muerto*. It is the shortest route to Glorieta Pass. The Cimarron cut-off is longer. And the Upper Trace is longer still. Thus it is plain that the Trace across the *Jornado* is the one we should follow. I will even go so far as to direct you to cast your vote for the *Jornado* route."

It was time for him to make his talk. Sabbath O'Shannon realized.

"Mr. Banion!" Even his voice did not sound natural in his own ears. "Before you do any more vote directin', I got a proposition to make you. You've been wantin' my outfit and load of stoves since long before we hit Council Grove and I wouldn't sell. Wa'al, I still won't *sell* to you, but I'll *dicker*. Lead this train across the Upper Trace, where we know there's wood, water, and buffers, and I'll *give* you my outfit, lock, stock and barrel!"

His throat was dry again. There was a dull ringing in his ears. Through the sound he heard the surprised exclamations of emigrants in the circle. He watched something between shock and

anger sweep across Treet Banion's face. "O'Shannon," he said thickly, "you're a meddling fool. I don't want your damned stoves!"

"You wanted them at Council Grove," Sharon Brownell's voice said coolly, from behind the trader. Sabbath guessed that Beaver-tail Bragg had primed the girl to speak the words. "Why have you changed your mind, Mr. Banion? Does crossing the *Jornado* mean more to you than the profit those stoves will bring?"

"Seems like a mighty fair offer," some anonymous voice said from the ranks behind the Missouri boy.

Another voice broke in. "Why in tarnation should the kid lose his wagon? Ain't the vote ours?"

Tension, taut as a violin string, made its sweep through the assemblage, and Treet Banion sensed it.

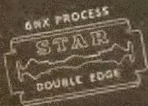
"This is rebellion!" he shouted. Thick-shouldered teamsters crowded forward to stand behind him. "I am commander of this caravan. You will travel the *Jornado*—"

"Not till we know your real reason for wantin' it that way," Beaver-tail Bragg's voice was soft, yet it had that clear, carrying power.

The men behind Treet Banion were double-gunned and death lay in their eyes. The threat was plain. Their weapons could spew death at emigrants grown sud-

MY! THIS
SUBWAY STRAP
IS SMOOTH!

LADY, THAT'S MY
FACE! I SHAVE WITH
STAR BLADES!



4 for 10¢



denly doubtful, unless something broke the council circle. Sabbath saw that.

He was close to the fire. There were crackling, half-burned limbs on the rim of it. He took two steps and stopped and swept a pair of them into his hands. A wild exultation was in his voice. "I'll show you why Banion wants to ride the *Jornado!*"

"Stop the fool!"

A gun boomed as the ranks opened before him. He saw wild lead drop an emigrant man beside him as he pressed into the darkness beyond the council fire. He had marked the location of Banion's wagons and lead whipped after him as his racing feet carried him toward the nearest one. The torches he carried, lit his rangy body. Their light was like a halo to target him. But Sabbath O'Shannon was past caring. He felt lead streak like a hot iron through the fleshy part of one leg but the speed of his run carried him onward. A high Conestoga tilt loomed above him now, Osnaburg sheeting as inflammable as dry prairie grass.

A teamster guard was rushing him, and he would likely die, Sabbath realized, as with a queer, detached calm he flung one blazing torch into the sheeting. Cloth scorched and broke before the impact of the limb. Flame started to spread like devil-fire.

THE teamster was a huge shadow above him now, swinging an empty rifle like a club. Sabbath weaved in beneath it, shoved the torch still clutched in his left hand straight into the man's bearded face. The teamster lurched back with a cry of pain. Sabbath heard feet closing in behind him. He spun around.

Light from the fiercely burning Conestoga showed him Treet Banion's black shape. The man had a short sleeve-gun in his hand. Flame spat from its muzzle, and Sabbath felt a dull, spreading pain in his chest.

This was death coming, and he knew it. The knowledge left him strangely calm. It was worth dying, for his death would guarantee life to Sharon Brownell and the others. Life to a flag that would continue to fly proudly from its Santa Fe masthead.

Yes, death would be all right, if he

could just take Treet Banion with him. The heat of the torch in his sagging fingers seared his hand. He flung it at the trader's face with his last strength. Banion screamed and clawed at his eyes. He lurched forward, and Sabbath felt his wounded leg cave under him as he tried to sidestep. He was going down on one side. Banion's boot was rising to smash his face. . . Then something seemed to lift the trader right from his feet. It was an explosion from within that blazing Conestoga.

"Gun-powder!" Sabbath's lips framed the words.

Twisted rifle barrels and broken gunstocks filled the air like flying canister. As though in some nightmare dream, Sabbath saw a broken rifle strike Treet Banion in the throat and drive his head backward to a queer, tilted angle. He knew that the spinal cord had been snapped. It was something that a poet might call justice. Then his own senses were blotted out by a rising tide of blackness.

When consciousness came next to Sabbath, it seemed that he was floating in some dim space. Then his ears picked up the pleasant music of iron tires crossing desert sand. Hands came out of the dimness, gently pressed him back into featherbed softness as he tried to sit erect.

Sharon's face came into his line of vision and Sabbath saw a little dazedly that the girl was half-laughing and half-crying. "Beaver-tail said you'd live," she exclaimed, "after he probed the bullets out of you. He said you had too much courage to die. He said the gods had special remedies for men like you. When that wagon exploded and our people saw what it's cargo had been, they just rolled like a wave over Banion's men. They—they hung them all this morning to the ends of their own wagon tongues. It—it was horrible, but sometimes out of horror comes peace."

The Missouri boy, Sabbath O'Shannon, gathered what strength he had left within him and managed a few weak words before he went to sleep again.

"Peace," he whispered, "an' a Santa Fe honeymoon?"

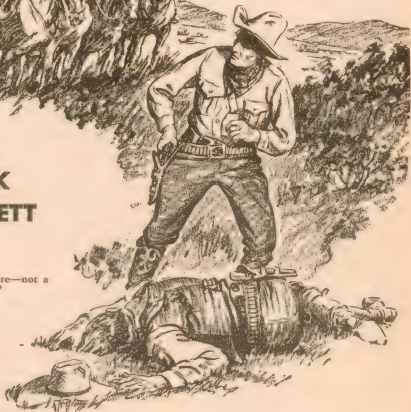
The girl's answer was softer than his own, but it seemed to him that she murmured, "Yes."

GOLD-COACH TRAIL

When Slim Hack deliberately changed the evidence on that fishy murder setup, he made himself the county's first choice for a new pine overcoat.

By
**JACK
STERRETT**

"Hold it, hombre—not a move!"



SLIM HACK had been riding shotgun on the Bannock gold-coach with Barney Wills for six months. He'd been a reckless and happy ranny. But now, Barney Wills was dead, had been dead for a month. And Slim, out of the hospital finally after two weeks of delirium and two weeks more of slow recovery from the near death that Hugo Brawn's roaring slugs had dealt, was a walking miracle. It was a wonder he had not died like Barney.

Completely well again, Slim walked into the stage-office to hand in his resignation. The manager stared up at him

for a long moment before making comment. He was looking at a whole lot of long, straight and square-shouldered youngster with a new look of queer lifelessness that had made a mask of his lean and good-looking face. He was a youngster whose steady brown eyes looked dead.

The manager nodded to himself. Here was a kid whose heart had been turned to ice. The best shotgun the stageline had ever had, he would be useless to them until he had found himself again.

"Look, Hack," the man said, "what you'll need to do is just drift grubline

for awhile, maybe hire out for a few months at punching cows. But come back when you're right and you'll find your old job waiting."

There was no flicker in Slim's agate-dead eyes as he took his pay. He nodded and turned away.

It was not long after that when he rode into the distant cowtown of Black Canyon. He was the breadth of two states from his starting point. In a hundred small ways, he had made sure that he was following without error the trail of Hugo Brawn and a man called Otto Rabb.

Rabb, Slim recalled, was a thin man with bleached hair and white-looking eyes. No plainsman, like the burly and ugly Hugo, Rabb was a furtive and slinking sort of lawyer who had been undoubtedly kicked out of practice somewhere East. Without asking questions, Slim had picked up idle talk of the pair in a half-dozen trail towns. And in Black Canyon he heard that Hugo and Rabb had bought a ranch nearby—bought it, as only Slim knew, with the gold they had gained at the cost of Barney Wills's life.

As he rode now through a narrow valley which led into the hills beyond Black Canyon, Slim was a different man from the one who had walked out of the stage-office in Bannock. Tough flesh had hardened his frame again. Once more, his face was deeply tanned. And a new beard, close-clipped, masked all his features save his high-arched nose and drilling eyes.

Not a landmark of the countryside escaped his scrutiny. This was the trail right enough—just as a youngster in town had described it to him, Hugo—and Rabb! It had been Rabb who had helped Hugo Brawn in the murderous attack on the stage. Slim's hard palm brushed the staghorn butt of his Frontier model. Well, then, it would be both of those hombres who would answer to him soon.

Whom! Crack! Crack! Whom-mm!

The bull-throated roar of the heavy gun was so close that Slim ducked in the saddle. Lashed spur-rowels plunged his bronc into a thicket of brush. Slim yanked him to a halt and peered out, his weapon fisted.

The arroyo was empty. But downhill a few rods and across the way, blue gun-

smoke curly lazily up the hillside.

Slim waited. For a long time, he sat motionless and holding his horse still. Then he lifted his gun-muzzle skyward and triggered. There was no answer to the powder-talk, no stir nor sign of life. He moved out cautiously and his searching presently discovered around the first bend downhill the sprawled, dead body of a cowboy. The waddy had been shot in the back at close range. He had not even had the chance to draw his forty-five.

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SLIM'S eyes were narrow as he studied the man. It was as plain as day that the hard-faced rider had been deliberately murdered. Searching the man's pockets, Slim fished a letter from his shirt and, instantly, his mind was alert. "Joe Rounds, Brawn Ranch, Black Canyon," read the address on the envelope. The name of the cowboy meant nothing. But Brawn Ranch! Surely, that meant that this rider had worked on Hugo Brawn's new place. Slim read the letter.

Joe Rounds:

I'll be damned if I like dealing with a man in the pay of an enemy, but if what you've wrote me about Hugo Brawn is true, I'll sure as hell meet you Tuesday in Cat Valley.

You'd better be playing square with me, because I'll sure come armed and ready to shoot if you're laying a trap.

Jim Wheeler.

Apparently, Slim speculated, the Jim Wheeler who had signed the letter had kept his rendezvous with the murdered Rounds. And as he had threatened, he had come ready and armed. Rounds had not played square with Wheeler and Wheeler had shot him. But wait! There was something fishy here. If Wheeler had shot Rounds, he'd have searched his victim for that letter and destroyed it. That didn't tie in.

As he squatted there, the crack of a twig beneath a horse's hoof brought Slim whirling to his feet. His left hand slipped the letter into his shirt as his right flashed

to his gun—but paused over the stock. "Hold it, hombre—not a move!" The barked order was harsh. "Hoist your hands an' hoist 'em empty!"

Slim stared into the leveled guns of a half-dozen riders. Two were badged lawmen and the one who had spoken had the look of a seasoned outlaw-hunter, a lean old man with gray eyes. Behind them—and for an unguarded instant Slim's eyes were aflame—were burly Hugo Brawn and sallow Otto Rabb.

His gaze again steady on the suspicious stare of the old lawman, Slim raised his hands. There was no flicker of expression on his face.

"Search 'im, Johnny," the lawman grunted to his young deputy. "Well, hombre," he drawled to Slim, "what's your story? Did you kill that cowboy?"

"No," Slim said tersely. He felt his six-gun removed. "I was just passin' by when the shots that killed this rider stampeded me into the brush. I reckon I laid there an hour. I had just come out for a look-see when you jumped me."

Slim saw that Hugo Brawn was glaring at him without recognition. The burly man climbed down to stoop over the cowboy's body and quick suspicion shot through Slim's mind as he saw the obvious disappointment in the killer's face as he arose from a quick search of the dead man's pockets and stared at him blackly. By that unguarded move of Hugo's, a dawning hunch became certainty in Slim's mind. Hugo had engineered this killing, if he had not done it himself. He had expected that letter to be found in the dead man's pocket. Slim guardedly watched these two men

he had tracked down—thanks to the beard that concealed his features, he saw, neither had recognized him. Perhaps neither dreamed that he was still alive.

The sheriff turned abruptly from Slim to Hugo. "This the fellow you saw?"

The thick-set Hugo shook his head, his black eyes sullen on Slim. "Never saw 'im before. I tell you, sheriff, I figured it was Wheeler I saw high-tailin'." His mouth thinned down. "Natural, it could've been this hombre. He'll sure have to explain hisself."

The sheriff nodded. "Well," he decided, "we'll ride up to your place, Johnny, you other fellows—pick up Joe's body and ride herd on this proddy gent."

Hugo and Rabb rode ahead with the sheriff. Slim brought up the rear with the others. His milling thoughts were far ahead. Who was Jim Wheeler and why, if his suspicions were correct, had Hugo wanted the sheriff to find a letter from Wheeler on the dead man's body? Plainly, to convict Wheeler of the killing. But why else?

As they rode up the valley, the men beside Slim talked. He grew alert as they mentioned the dead man's name, and Wheeler's.

"Right here," one of the punchers was saying to the young deputy, "is a trail that leads to Wheeler's place. Reckon if it was Wheeler, an' not this hombre, that got Joe—he'd've high-tailed that way for sure."

Slim's eyes recorded the landmarks. If the chance came, he'd be back this way.

It was late afternoon as they rode down to the spread of ranch buildings that made up the Brawn outfit. For an hour, in the



house, the sheriff pumped questions at Slim and learned nothing and at last, disgustedly, they shoved him into a windowless storeroom and locked him in. Standing by the door, he could hear the rumble of their voices but no words. His cell was black dark and he sat down on the floor to wait.

When he fell asleep, or for how long, he had no way of knowing. He was awakened by a furtive sound at the door. Slowly, he arose to a tense crouch. The door began to open. Light flooded into his prison. Lamplight. So it was night.

As the door swung wide, Hugo Brawn was revealed, ugly and heavy in his own shadow. Slim saw the forty-five the man held and made no move. After a long moment, Hugo spoke in a low voice:

"Cowboy, you're in a hell of a jam. They might take a notion to hang you. You'd like to get outa here? If I was to let you go, you'd hightail to hell an' gone?"

Slim's mind moved swiftly. Hugo wanted him gone. The killer was figuring he was no more than a wandering cowboy who would be glad to beat it—for a price.

"Boss," Slim grunted a pretense of eagerness, "you don't know how glad I'd be to see the last of this place."

Hugo's big gun threatened. "Look," he growled, "you've horned in on things that're none of your business. The sheriff an' his deputy are in the kitchen tyin' into their grub. You gimme your promise to scatter outa these hills for good an' I'll let you go."

"Well, hell," Slim agreed, "that's all I want!"

"Okay," Hugo snarled and twitched his gun, "I'll tell 'em you must've found some way of pickin' the lock. But, first—I want the letter you took from Joe's body."

Slim stiffened, then relaxed. "Sure thing," he said easily. "Dunno why I picked it up. Don't mean a thing to me."

Hugo was reaching for the envelope when Slim suddenly drew it back. "Well, hell," he stalled, "mebbe you'd better show me my hoss, first. If this is a deal, I oughta be sure it's square."

For an instant, Slim thought Hugo would shoot. The big gun shook savagely and Slim tensed to dive in fighting. Then

the man growled and stepped aside. "C'mon."

Slim slipped across the room and stepped out into dark on the porch. His horse was already there, he saw, hitched to the rail of the porch. He stepped quickly forward and released the bridle from the rail. Hugo was beside him, prodding his gun into his ribs.

"Not so fast—I want that letter."

Slim chuckled. "I'm so anxious to hit the breeze—I forgot." He reached into his hip pocket and drew out an envelope which he thrust into Hugo's hand. As Hugo moved aside to peer at it in the light from a window, Slim flashed into the saddle and lashed back with his spurs.

The roar of Hugo's six-gun, and his bellow of rage, mingled with Slim's laugh as he lunged into darkness. The envelope he had given Hugo was empty. The letter was still in his shirt.



SLIM fanned the wind. It was entirely possible that, even in the dark, an effort would be made to run him down. When he was sure it was safe, he circled wide and headed downslope. In an hour, he neared the place where the killing had occurred and, where the trails branched, he took the one that led to the Wheeler ranch.

He had crossed two ridges and was riding down into a third valley in the moonlight that had risen to light the trail. He was rounding a big boulder when a voice sang out from above.

"Halt! Stranger, don't make a move! Who are you?"

Slim hesitated, spoke a false name.

There was silence for a moment, then the voice came again and Slim's muscles twitched. It was a woman's voice, intended for none of the harsh threat with which its owner tried to pack it. "Never heard of you. You turn around and go back. You've no business here."

Slim could see nothing in the shadows near the top of the rock. He made no move. "Ma'am," he said quietly, "I can't turn back. Hugo Brawn's on my trail an' he'd fill me fulla lead."

"That story don't hold water," came after a pause. "Chances are you're one

of big Hugo's gunfighters yourself."

"Ma'am," Slim insisted, "I ain't armed an' I can't go back. I tell you they're fixin' to mebbe hang me. Listen—you know a cowpuncher named Rounds? Well, he was shot to death today an' there was a letter on him which pointed to a man named Jim Wheeler as the killer. As for me, I think that letter was placed on Rounds apurpose to get Wheeler in wrong."

From the shadows above there was an exclamation in a voice startled out of all masculine harshness. It was wholly feminine. There was a sliding sound and, suddenly, in the trail before him, Slim saw a slight figure dressed in jeans and a man's hickory shirt. He could see the clear-cut oval of a girl's face lifted and the flash of blue eyes, the dark smoke of tumbled hair. She held a shotgun defiantly in her hands.

"Toss me down that letter," she demanded. "I'm not afraid to shoot."

Slim handed it down. While she slowly deciphered the wording in the bright moonlight, he slid softly from the saddle and stood quietly waiting.

"You are a stranger," the girl admitted in a low voice, "and you've served my father a good turn. You'll swear you found this on Joe Rounds's body?"

Slim nodded. Briefly, he outlined the day's events for her and throughout her eyes remained steady on his. He could feel the slow rise of his pulse beneath that searching look.

"Ma'am," Slim ended earnestly, "I come this way 'cause I sure figured that Hugo an' Rabb was planning' Wheeler no good. I've got reasons of my own for wantin' those skunks hung high. But first, if I can, I aim to help straighten this trouble."

She nodded, stepped near to look into his face, and seemed satisfied. As he saw the peachskin beauty of her face, his heart caught.

"My mother's dead. Jim Wheeler's my father," she explained swiftly. "We've been here since before I was born. Brawn and Rabb bought the ranch neighboring ours. They'd been here no time at all before they discovered we held the best water and grass. Rabb was a lawyer once, wasn't he? He uncovered what they claim

was a faulty land-survey. They're claiming that the best part of our land, even our house, belongs to them. They're threatening to move us off."

Slim swore throatily, then apologized, his hat in his hands. "How about the sheriff?" he asked.

"Stone's a good man," the girl said, "but helpless in the face of the red tape Rabb's thrown around us. He's been at their place most of the day trying to argue them out of a court order to evict us tonight or tomorrow. They're ordering him to serve it."

Again, Slim swore and jammed his hat back on his head. "Where's your Dad?"

"In the kitchen at home. He's got a rifle and a shotgun on the table. He'd kill even Stone before he'd let them move us out."

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S L I M saw admiringly what she'd been trying to do. She'd been determined that nobody should pass this spot to reach the ranch. She'd been trying to save her father from the consequences of any wild and impulsive action he might take.

"I take it," Slim smiled briefly, "your Pop don't know you're here."

"He'd be wild if he knew. He thinks I'm asleep."

"Look," Slim said, "lead me to the house. By heaven, I'm thinkin' we'll blow Hugo an' Rabb, an' all their dirty plans, too, all the way to hell!"

Slim had his hand on the pommel and the girl was leading a horse from the brush when they heard a sound, up-trail, which froze them—the clip-clop of a pair of horses.

"You got a gun I can use?" Slim asked sharply.

Swiftly, she handed him a six-gun hanging from her saddle. "Hurry," he grunted. "Hide your hoss, again, an' skin back to the top of that rock. You stop these hombres the way you stopped me—I'll do the rest."

In the space of seconds, there was nothing but moonlight where they had stood. Two riders appeared from up-trail. Sharp and hard, the girl's command broke out

from the pinnacle of the rock overhead.

"Halt! And put up your hands—quick!"

There was a moment of lunging confusion as the riders hung their hands over the weapons at their hips. Reluctantly, as they quieted their horses, they lifted their empty fists skyward. And Slim slid out into the trail in front of them, his leveled weapon holding all the menace of a cannon.

Slim recognized one instantly as Otto Rabb. The other was the smooth-faced kid deputy. He held them frozen under the glint of his eyes behind the gunsights. The deputy smothered an exclamation. Rabb swore.

Slim silenced them with a twitch of his gun-muzzle as the girl slid down. "Take that deputy's weapon from his holster. I don't want him buttin' in. No," Slim said as she moved swiftly to carry out his order, "leave Rabb's weapon where it is. He an' I have business."

The girl disarmed the grim-faced deputy and stepped aside. There was a snarl in Rabb's throat.

"Shut up!" Slim ordered curtly. He began, carelessly, to toss his gun in his fist. "Rabb," he drawled in a hard monotone, "we meet again. But this is the third time—not just the second. Mebbe you've forgotten the first time. Mebbe you didn't recognize me, today, but you would've if you'd shaved me clean of these face-whiskers. Think back, Rabb—think back to the day a storm of lead swept Barney Wills to his death from the roof of the Bannock gold-coach. Yeh, think back. Barney died, but I didn't—or mebbe I'm just a six-gun ghost!"

As he spoke, Slim slowly and deliberately shoved the big forty-five into his holster and folded his arms across his chest. Stabbing, cold splinters of light flickered in his eyes.

"Well—killer Rabb?"

Rabb's thin face was ghastly in the moonlight. For a murderous instant, he glared down in frozen horror at the man who had come back to haunt him. Then a choked scream broke from his skinny throat and he slashed for his gun.

It looked as though Slim could never draw soon enough to meet the fury of Rabb's frantic speed. And, actually, his

weapon did not roar in the same voice with Rabb's, but a split second later. But Rabb's wild shot was a frenzied miss and Slim's was not. Slim's slug slammed straight into the front of the killer's head.

The young deputy stared down at Rabb's still body on the ground for a long moment, then looked up with a convulsive swallow. "Murder!" he grunted.

"No," Slim corrected, "self-defense. If you tell the truth in court, you can never swear to anything but the fact that Rabb drew first, that I didn't make a pass for my own weapon until Rabb was almost in the act of firin'."

"That's right, but—hell!" He stared with reluctant admiration. "You got your nerve. An' don't get the idea I dislike what you've done. I'd as soon see Hugo Brawn laid there beside that skunk." He looked at the girl. "Anne, Sheriff Stone an' I ain't in this because we like it. We're bound by the law to serve that court order to put you out."

Anne Wheeler was staring at Slim with wide-eyed wonder. She did not look at the young deputy as she answered him. "Sure, Johnny, I understand."

Slim felt himself grow hot under the girl's look. He heard Johnny's low chuckle as the deputy made up his mind. "Well, hombre, looks like you're on Anne's side an' that's jake with me. I reckon, after all, I won't try to serve that order tonight. Instead—I'll lug Rabb's body back to Hugo. I'll swear that Rabb threw down on you an' that you shot to save yourself. An'—I'll say nothin' of the words you passed Rabb's way. That the way you want it?"

Slim nodded. Quickly, the deputy was down and helping Slim lift Rabb's body across the dead man's saddle. He climbed up again. For an instant more, he gazed down, then lifted his hand. "Adios," he said, and turned uptrail.

Slim and Anne looked into each other's eyes. Then, turning quickly and breathlessly apart, they went for their horses.

Jim Wheeler opened the door of the little ranchhouse in the valley to let them in. He was so relieved at Anne's safety that he forgot to scold her and his suspicion of Slim turned to admiration as the girl made explanations. He laid down his shotgun with shaking hands.

Slim liked the old man. The lined, grey features bespoke a kindly man overwrought by a grim resolve to protect his home against all odds. As Anne moved quickly from stove to table with coffee and biscuits, Slim could not keep his eyes from drifting to watch her. And, once or twice, color mounted her cheeks.

Slim's story pulled exclamations from them. "By all that's holy," Wheeler grunted, "Hugo Brawn's goose is sure cooked now. I'm bettin' on deputy Johnny. He won't spill the beans on you. Come sunup or sooner, Hugo'll be there with Sheriff Stone without an idea of the surprise awaitin' him. Now," he said decisively, "you head for the hay, young feller. You're tucked."

Slim protested that he had no idea of sleeping. He was astonished when he awoke, to find the slanted rays of sunrise already creeping into the room they had given him. Instantly, he was out of bed and pulling on his boots. He was buckling on his gun when he heard voices outside. Stooping to peer from the window, he grunted a curse.

A posse was there already, a half-dozen men who were climbing down from their horses and tying them to the poles of the corral a hundred feet from the house. Slim identified Sheriff Stone and the slim figure of Johnny. Closer to the house and headed for the kitchen was Anne Wheeler, a basket of eggs over her arm. Hulking Hugo Brawn strode beside her.

"—an' you'll marry me," Hugo was threatening, "or I'll have your Dad hung for killin' Joe Rounds. It's the only way you can save his life. What's more, you'll release that murderin' stranger to the sheriff. Girl—I ain't foolin' atall!"

Slim whirled from the room and ran to the kitchen. He surprised old man Wheeler, crouched by the door with his shotgun.

"Hold it!" Slim growled sharply. "This is my show. You forgettin' how we planned it? If there's any shootin'—I do it!"

Wheeler fell back reluctantly and with a sigh. "Well, but hell, I'd sure like to have a chunk of that skunk's hide."

Slim grinned, then snaked his forty-



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five from its holster, opened the door and stepped out.

Hugo saw him and stopped as though struck, his snaky, black eyes darting, his hand bare inches from his holstered gun. At the flick of Slim's gun-barrel, he swore savagely and lifted his hands.

For a breathless instant, Hugo glared furiously, then lifted his voice in a bawl. "Hell, Sheriff—look who's here!"

Slim heard the thud of the sheriff's boots plunging in the dust as he ran toward the house, the stampede of the posse's footsteps behind him. He heard Jim Wheeler slide out the door behind him and knew that the old man's deadly scattergun was cocked and leveled. There would be no hasty and unconsidered moves—just yet.

"What goes on here?" the sheriff grunted coldly as he drew near and halted.



SLIM did not look at the lawman. His eyes, as dead and hard as agates, were fixed on Hugo's writhing features. "Sheriff," he drawled in a clear and brittle voice, "this is fact-finderin'. I reckon you aren't too clear about a lot of things goin' on an' I'm only askin' you to hold your fire 'til you can hear them facts. Are you with me?"

"Go ahead an talk," Stone grunted. "There's a sight I'd like to know—about a thing or two Johnny whispered to me in private."

"Okay," Slim nodded. "First, we'll hear what Hugo has to say. Hugo, you're tellin' that Jim Wheeler killed Joe Rounds. What makes you think so?"

Hugo's face was black with rage. "Because," he howled furiously, "there was a letter on Joe sayin' Wheeler was gonna meet 'im at that place yesterday at about the time the shootin' took place. The letter was signed by Wheeler, hisself. You stole it off Joe's body!" he mouthed madly.

"I might ask you," Slim drawled, "how you knew that letter was there. I might add, also, that you let me escape last night thinkin' I was turnin' the letter over to you."

There was a sharp cackle of laughter from Jim Wheeler behind Slim. "But the

funniest part," Wheeler crowed, "is what the sheriff an' that every other man here knows an' that Rabb an' Hugo plainly didn't know—I can sign my name, okay, but I've never writ another word!"

"That's the truth!" the sheriff exploded sharply.

Hugo's face died. Eyes stupid and glazed, he stood speechless and motionless and Slim supplied the answers. "It's just Hugo Brawn's own particular brand of rottenness. He's greedy. He figured that, if he framed Wheeler into danger of hangin', then offered to clear the old man or engineer his escape from the law—he'd not only get the Wheeler ranch but *Anne Wheeler* as well! He wrote that letter, hisself, murdered his own cowboy an' put it on 'im to be found!"

For a moment, Slim's eyes bored the man icily. "Yeh—he was always rotten. Hugo, you remember me? I'm Slim Hack, shotgun on the Bannock gold-coach the night your murderin' lead-storm swept Barney Wills to his death!"

Just as he had done the night before, Slim now deliberately returned his six-gun to its holster and stood with his arms folded. And just as Rabb had looked the night before, Hugo now looked as though he stared at a six-gun ghost. And, with a sudden, bubbling scream in his throat, he tried to slash for his gun.

Hugo's gun came out fast, almost with blinding speed, but Slim's matched it, even beat it a shade. The two-voiced roar of the deadly weapons was almost one. Slim's slug smashed home, ripped Hugo from his feet and sent him cartwheeling in a death convulsion.

The sheriff and his men stood frozen as Slim dropped his forty-five to the ground and slowly turned. They made no move as he headed for the door. Then, suddenly, he stumbled and there was a squashy crunch of eggs as Anne dropped her basket and ran to his side to give him the warm strength of her arms. "Oh—! Dad, he's hurt! Open the door!"

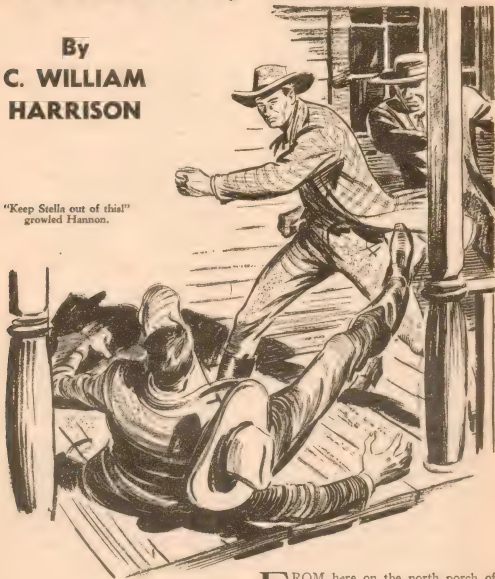
Jim Wheeler stared anxiously into Slim's face as he held the door open. His chin dropped as Slim winked at him and whispered from the corner of his mouth.

"Pop—I ain't even scratched. You got a job here for a good cowhand?"

WELCOME, TINHORN!

By
**C. WILLIAM
HARRISON**

"Keep Stella out of this!"
growled Hannon.



Everybody, except his percentage girl Stella, wanted to make Ruck Hannon a crooked gambler. They prodded him, even Janet the girl he wanted to marry, into cheating his way to owning the biggest cattle kingdom of the range.

FROM here on the north porch of his gambling hall Ruck Hannon could look over and across the lower skirts of the town and into the valley that curved off toward the foothills. Out there the afternoon sun lay bright on grama and sage and cottonwood groves. Further on, where the valley lifted into the foothills, lay the greener patterns at the headwaters of Sugar Creek, where Hannon's little ranch waited untended.

"You could do well up there, Ruck."

Always when he stood here during the lazy hours of afternoon, Stella left her room to stand behind him. Always she said those words, and always Ruck kept his eyes on that far patch of color.

He said, "Some men could. Not Ruck Hannon."

Stella was a tall, strong woman. At this hour her hair was plain and her face was plain. Tonight when townsmen and rangemen gravitated to Hannon's gambling tables she would be another woman, painted and quick-laughing because it was her job to be that way.

She said quietly, "You wouldn't keep looking up there if you didn't want to be on your ranch again, Ruck."

Impatience pulled at Ruck Hannon. "If I was up there, I'd wish I was down here." And then his thoughts ran on, saying in his mind things he didn't bother to put into words. The distant things had always looked better to Ruck Hannon. They teased him, like the fall of a card, or the spin of a roulette wheel. It was something inside of him that he couldn't change.

"You could make all the money you need up there on that ranch," Stella said. "All you lack is the patience to wait for it."

Her quiet reproach turned Ruck Hannon slowly. There was a tightness around his mouth and a stubborn glint in his eyes.

"I've got my reasons."

Stella nodded. "Yes, you've got your reason," she said. "It's not that you like gambling better than ranching. You think it is, but it's not. Janet Reese is your reason."

"Leave her out of this, Stella."

"You want your pile the quick way because that is how Janet Reese and her father want it," Stella said steadily. "Money is the only way they can measure a man, and you're letting it twist you."

He faced her with anger rising in his eyes. "It's none of your concern." And then he tried to temper his tone with an old argument. "Anyhow I take my chances along with the men who gamble at my tables. I keep my games straight."

"You have so far," Stella said. She watched him through an interval of silence as though she could read every thought in his mind. It irritated him.

"You have so far, Ruck," she said

again. She left him there as Monte Dane and Lee Selby came up on the porch.

Monte Dane paused and touched his hat and smiled, as Stella turned through the door of Hannon's *Fair Chance*. Dane was a big man, arrogantly handsome, and there was a glint of humor in his dark eyes as he swung around to Ruck Hannon.

"She's a fine looking woman, Hannon. I'd like to pay her wages any time you're through with her."

Hannon gave Dane a long, cloudy glance. He said slowly, "You've got a nasty way of saying things, Monte. You ought to be careful that way."

Streaky laughter came into Monte Dane's dark eyes. "Naturally I figured since she's your come-on girl—" He stopped that. The humor drained out of his eyes, and he frowned slightly. "You don't need to get sore. I didn't mean anything."

"Sure you didn't," Ruck said.

Lee Selby was a slender, intent man standing at Monte Dane's side. He had small, restless eyes and his right hand constantly twirled the gold nugget fob of his watch. He carried a hideout derringer not four inches from the watch in his vest pocket. Lee Selby never smiled.

Selby said, "Sometime I'd like to see if you can play as rough as you make out, Hannon."

Ruck's gaze sharpened and turned cold. He had known it would come like this, with Monte Dane holding back while Lee Selby itched the fight on. Selby was always loaded for trouble, and he had never made much effort to hide his barbed dislike for Hannon. Selby's pale stare was like a hot finger scratching at Hannon's temper.

"You might give me a try now," Ruck said softly.

Selby shook his head. "Uh-huh—this is business, this visit."

Ruck held all expression out of his face as he balanced the sharp run of his thoughts. He didn't want trouble, but he knew this could end in nothing else. This was what Stella had meant when she said, "*You've kept your games honest so far.*" She had known Monte Dane and Lee Selby would come here, and she had known why they would come. Just as Ruck Hannon knew why they had come:

to force him to run fixed gambling tables. There wasn't room in town for an honest gambler as long as Dane and Selby could throw their weight around.

Ruck said levelly, "You're wrong, Lee. You and Monte have no business with me."

Monte Dane sighed, "I thought it would be that way."



A QUICK glint of ruthless temper lunged through Lee Selby's stare, and he began to slow the twirl of his watch fob. Selby didn't try to mask his warning when he spoke, his voice thin and flat with danger.

"You're asking for trouble if you don't play along with us, Hannon. Don't get us wrong; we didn't come here to mince words. We're telling you: tighten up your games, or fold up."

"You telling me what to do, Lee?" Ruck murmured.

Monte Dane spoke quick and rough. "Yes, by Judas, we're telling you! We had this town cornered until you set up the *Fair Chance*. You're a gambler, and you know our games are fixed, but our customers didn't guess anything until you started running straight tables. Now everybody is wonderin' about us. You're taking away our business, and we don't like it. We don't aim to stand for it, savvy?"

Ruck looked at Monte Dane. He said, "I savvy," and then contempt rode into his tone. "Now maybe you'd better start understanding a thing or two. Don't try to shove me around with your threats. I'll close the *Fair Chance* when I get ready, and as long as my doors are open I'll run straight games. If that's all the business you have with me, clear out."

Neither Dane nor Selby moved. Lee Selby stopped twirling his watch fob, and that was a warning in itself for Ruck Hannon. Hatred and kill lust was a bright glitter in the gambler's pale stare.

"You're just askin' for it," Selby sneered.

Monte Dane grunted an oath. "We'll take you apart, Hannon. I'll have your hide before I'm through with you, and I'll have that Stella filly—"

Ruck's fist caught Dane full in the mouth. It was a swift, solid blow that spun Dane around and slumped him loosely to his knees. Across the street a man let out a high-pitched yell of alarm.

Lee Selby's hand slashed under his coat for his gun, murderously fast. Ruck caught the man's fist as the gun whipped clear. He jerked the gambler's hand out and down, then stepped forward and hammered his fist into Selby's middle. He stepped forward again, a third time, smashing his fist home with each stride, then released Selby at a man's harsh yell of warning.

"Watch Dane!"

Ruck's belt gun was in his hand as he spun. "Don't try it, Monte!"

Gray washed into Dane's face, and he let his drawn weapon fall with a quick drop of his hand.

Ruck laughed with cold contempt. "You've got guts as long as you've got a man's back for a target," he bit out. "All right, Dane, you've had your fun here. Get up and get out."

Monte Dane stood up, his face white with fury. He pulled Selby to his feet, started the gambler staggering down the porch steps with a shove of his hand. He faced Ruck squarely for one last moment of hatred.

"We'll be back—" he said—"tonight, Hannon."

"Sure," Ruck sneered, "and don't forget to bring all your dogs with you. You may need them."

The afternoon sun went down behind the western foothills, and life began to stir along the town's rutted street. Buckboards rolled ranchers and their families into town; punchers who were flushed with a month's pay racked sweaty horses down the street, eager for games and drink.



THE news of Ruck's fight with Monte Dane and Lee Selby spread a rising current of excitement through the town. Having a cigar after his supper at the hotel, Ruck could feel speculative eyes searching him covertly. He caught snatches of guarded conversation as he started back to his gambling hall.

"So Ruck tangled with Dane and Selby! How do you figure the wind-up?"

"You know Selby. He's hell on high heels, that baby."

"Monte Dane ain't to be played with. I seen him once in a fracas. . . ."

Clyde Reese and his daughter, Janet, were waiting when Ruck Hannon went up the porch steps of the *Fair Chance*. A short, heavy man with iron gray hair, Reese had a secretive streak beneath his blunt surface. He met Ruck with a half smile and a sharp glance.

"Seems I've been hearin' about a little run-in you had today with Dane and Selby."

Ruck nodded. "Nothing serious," he said.

Reese grunted dryly, "Any fuss with them two is serious. They don't like the games you've been running. I reckon they tried to push you into line."

"Just a little misunderstanding," Ruck said, and looked at Clyde Reese's daughter. She was a slender, proud girl, with a suggestion of cool willfulness always in her eyes and fine mouth. She was what her father had made her, self-certain and faintly highhanded. She would not, Ruck doubted, ever know the humility that Stella knew. He was surprised at his comparison of the two women.

He said, "Hello, Janet."

She had at times an unconscious daring that could stir him to the core. She gave him a smile that was full of meaning.

"There is talk you were fighting over the favors of your—of the Stella woman," she said. "You should be careful, Ruck."

Clyde Reese said in his blunt way, "That's why we came here, Ruck. I figure you ought to get out of the gambling business if you ever marry my daughter."

Resentment scratched through Ruck Hannon, but he said nothing. It was Clyde Reese's way to want to run things.

"If I closed the *Fair Chance* I'd only have the Square Y for a starter," he reminded slowly. "You said my ranch wasn't big enough to support your daughter. If you'd let Janet take things the way they are—"

"And live on that shoe-string spread of yours?" Reese snorted.

"Women have started marriage with less."

"My daughter won't," Reese said stiffly. "If you want her bad enough, you'll see that she gets what she deserves." A glint sharpened his eyes. "You could do that tonight."

Ruck held his face expressionless. He said nothing.

"Sam Clary will be in tonight," Reese went on. A shrewd note had taken some of the bluntness out of his voice. "He's nicked you heavy the last two games, and he's out to break your bank tonight. If he starts losing, he'll stick to his bottom dollar. He swears he'd put up his ranch just for the pleasure of cleaning you out. Clary's ranch would be yours if his luck went bad."

Ruck smiled faintly. "Sam's been riding a high streak. He might win tonight."

"He won't if you play your cards right," Reese jerked his hand impatiently. "Don't be a fool, Ruck. Any man with a grain of sense would do the same thing. The time to make a killing is when the best chance comes. This is it."

Ruck was silent a moment. Then he moved his glance to Janet. "You want it this way?"

She nodded. "It would make you one of the biggest men in the county. Ruck, we've got our own lives to think of."

Ruck said, "All right then. That's how it is."

They left him, and he took the cigar from his mouth. The sweet, full taste of the smoke was gone. He sent the cigar spinning into the dust of the street.

◇ ◇ ◇

SAM CLARY put the game out in the open at the first. He was a big, hearty man who would lay a bet on anything at any time. He sat down, broke the seal of a new deck, and grinned at Ruck Hannon.

"I like your style, Ruck, and I warn you I'm out to give you a cleaning. I always wanted to break an honest gambler, and you're my baby. Just to keep the game friendly, I'll pay you ten thousand for that chunk of land you own up in the hills, if I win. That's twice what it's worth."

"I've a kind of itch for your ranch," Ruck drawled, and found something in

that to remind him of Stella's words.

"It's yours if you can take it," Clary said. "Have a drink for a starter?"

Clary won the first five hands, and Ruck saw twelve hundred dollars of his money move to the other side of the table. Now that the game was on, Sam Clary lapsed into grim silence. He was a man who played to win, but he played his cards straight.

Excitement began to pile up in the room, and the deal came to Ruck. He shuffled the cards slowly. A random word came to Ruck, and he looked around to find Janet Reese close behind him, standing by her father.

Ruck half rose in his chair. "Clyde, she shouldn't be here."

"Just for luck," Janet said. "I couldn't stay away."

Clyde Reese said with a trace of grimness, "That's all right, Ruck. She's with me. Play cards."

Ruck dealt. He bet, and Clary raised it, and Ruck upped it again, on nothing but a four flush in spades. His mind wasn't on the game. Clary played his hand

pat, and Ruck took one. He lost the pot to a trey in Jacks.

Sam Clary looked worried. "Look here, Ruck, if there's somethin' else keeping your mind off the game we can play it off later."

"I'm all right," Ruck said.

Clary shrugged. He sent a quick glance around the crowd. He said, "Oh," and Ruck looked up. Monte Dane, Lee Selby and a gun-tough named Tip Covall stood at the inner edge of the audience, near the table. Clary said, "So that's it."

"It's all right," Ruck said again. "Play cards, Sam."

The next hand went to Ruck, but he found no elation in it. He knew why Dane and Selby and Covall were there. They wanted to watch the game, and if Ruck didn't turn to trickery to win they would start a fight. It sent a current of bitter humor coursing through Ruck. Dane and Selby were trying to force him by threat to cheat, and Clyde Reese and his daughter thought that any means was right so long as it paid off.

Maybe Reese was right after all, Ruck

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thought. It seemed that only those who played rough got ahead. Look at Clyde Reese, who asked no quarter and gave none. What about Sam Clary, who had had Ruck's Square Y quarantined for tick fever a year ago. Clary hadn't worried about that quarantine driving the Square Y to the rocks. Maybe it took elbows and boots to fight a man to the top.

Clary placed his bets heavy, and Ruck won the next four hands without hardly being aware of it. He looked at his pile and estimated six thousand in it. He was surprised. Two thousand of his money and four thousand of Clary's. Clary bet out two notes, and lost them. In spite of himself, Ruck felt excitement begin pinching down on his nerves. He was on an up-streak of luck, and here was his chance to win everything Janet wanted, everything he wanted. He played his cards with more than usual openness. He dropped one pot, and won the next two.

Strain got into Sam Clary's face and began pulling at the muscles. The room turned silent and expectant. Ruck looked up, and there was an ugly glitter in the eyes of Lee Selby and Monte Dane.

"Here's your chance," Clary said thickly. "My ranch against your pile. No raises, and one throw-off."

Ruck nodded. "*This is it,*" he thought. "*Why take a chance? Why fight Dane and Selby, and maybe lose everything you've wanted at the same time? Clary asked for it.*"

◆ ◆ ◆

RUCK shuffled the deck, faster this time. He sent the cards spinning across the table, and knew each one that fell in front of Clary. He knew each one he dropped for himself—four deuces.

He saw Clary glance at his cards. The man couldn't hide the sharp glint of hope that came to his eyes.

"Standing pat," Clary said. Relief was in his tone. "I don't mind saying you've cured me, Ruck."

"Sure," Ruck said. "I'm taking one."

He tossed off his discard, pulled one

from the top of the deck. It was a useless move. He held the winning hand, and he knew it. He looked up. Dane and Selby, being gamblers, had seen through his shuffle and deal. They knew. Tomorrow the word would start around town that Ruck had won with a crooked deal. That was how Monte Dane and Lee Selby wanted it.

Ruck looked at Clyde Reese, and saw the rancher whisper a word in his daughter's ear. Janet smiled at Ruck.

But Stella wasn't smiling. She stood there painted and dressed the way it was her job to be, just looking at Ruck.

"*She's had it tough, but she's never cheated,*" Ruck thought. "*Stella is a fool.*"

Sam Clary flipped his cards over with a grin. "I guess the pot's mine for a king high full."

Ruck lifted his cards, and pushed them slowly into the deck. "Yes, Sam, it's yours."

It was Lee Selby who opened the fight. Uncontrolled hatred lunged through the man's eyes, and he made a stabbing grab for his gun. Ruck caught the edge of the table and yelled, "Look out, Sam!" and then up-ended the table against Selby and Monte Dane. Both men went down, instantly smothered by on-lookers, and as Ruck kicked to his feet he saw the third gunman, Tip Covall, turn tail and push quickly through the crowd. . . .

Janet Reese and her father were gone, and Sam Clary found Ruck Hannon standing on the north end of the building's porch, looking off through the night toward the low black bulge of the foothills. There was a let-down note in Clary's voice.

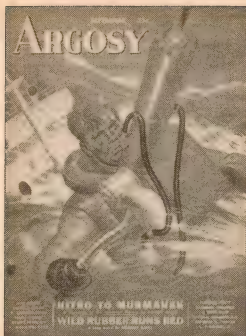
"Ruck, I did what I set out to do, but I can't say I'm as happy about it as I thought I'd be. I can't figure why. But my offer still goes for that land of yours."

Ruck turned slowly. "Thanks, Sam, but I sort of like that land."

Clary shrugged, looked at Ruck a moment, then swung away, walking heavily. The door opened, and Stella's tall straight shape came out into the night's shadows.

Ruck Hannon stood there waiting for her.





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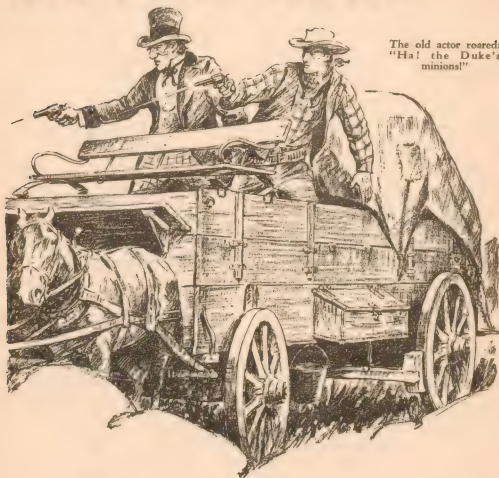
Gripping Gunhawk Novelette

By TOM W. BLACKBURN



His comical, scarecrow appearance masked Christian Defever's grim determination to make the infamous Ora Grande a town for decent people. But then Defever liked to give his victims a hearty laugh—before he killed them!

MUSKETEERS



The old actor roared:
"Ha! the Duke's
minions!"

CHAPTER ONE

Smoking Freight

DRAKE SCOTT glanced again at his fellow passenger in the heavy, rebuilt Murphy wagon. The fellow was long-gear'd and lank, but Drake suspected unguessed weight in his big-boned frame. He had a long, horsey face with no markings of age a man could go by. His gray mane of hair was long, being sheared raggedly off across the back just above his wide shoulders. He wore a battered tall hat of patchy felt, a shabby frocked coat, ragged-cuffed gaitered trousers, and a pair of cracked, thin shoes which might have once been elegant.

Drake wondered again about the man. He was obviously a boomer, a drifting, broken-down actor. Oro Grande was a queer place for such a man to head. There could be but one good explanation. The man must be a fugitive, also, running away from something—running as far as he could. Drake felt sympathy.

Neither of the men were miners. They showed no haste. The fact they rode this jolting freight was proof of that. So the strike at Oro Grande had no more drawn the tall man than it had Drake. Out of this speculation, Drake felt a sense of kinship growing. He was grateful for that. A running man has enough of being alone.

He thought of something he might say

which would draw the other out of his silence. But the driver was ahead of him. The trail slid into a meadow which gave the man on the seat a chance to lift his attention momentarily from his ribbons. He screwed around in his seat, speaking to both his passengers.

"Give us an hour and we'll drop into the diggings," he promised garrulously. "You gents got friends ahead that've staked claims for you?"

The old actor made no answer.

Drake shook his head.

The driver clucked his tongue against his teeth. "You ain't got a chanst, then," he said knowingly. "There's a bunch of wolves who have grabbed up every unmarked foot of ground and they're ready to burn more powder above ground than below to hold it. The camp's a powderkeg with the fuse lit—and a man's a fool that'd go there on a gamble!"

When neither passenger made an answer to this flat challenge, the driver shrugged. "Well, I've told you," he said gloomily. "I'd a sight rather work a good claim than tool this bone-jolter. But I ain't filing in Oro Grande. I know when something's got me beat. And the Silica Syndicate's it!"

This brought an answer from the man in the tall hat. He stirred impatiently, plainly irritated with the driver's prying prophecies. "Troubles!" he snorted. "There has been, sir, no strife worthy of the name—no warriors—since the Great Bard penned his last golden word. Those things died with the great Shakespeare! And it is magpies like you who killed them. Silence! Your wagon makes enough noise!"

The driver looked startled, colored, and swore under his breath.

Drake grinned, a little flame of warmth kindled in him by the old boomer's lofty scorn.

The man in the tall hat leaned back and closed his over-size, prominent eyes with a sleepy sag to the lines of his mouth. The driver shook his ribbons out and turned his attention back to their track, which was now stabbing through a boulder field.

A moment later, three masked men suddenly appeared against the low-hung sun.

THE trio moved smoothly, as though to a prearranged plan. One swung into the head of the team, checking forward motion of the lumbering wagon. The other two stood motionless, guns in hand, for a moment.

Drake saw how it was going to be. He flattened himself against the load, pulling his gun free with slow care so as not to draw attention to himself. The guns of the men in the track snapped together. Drake heard the driver's body jerk and spill from the seat into the dust without outcry. He waited, hoping for a quick shot as one or the other of the bandits came around the wagon. But the old actor didn't wait.

He surged upright and Drake saw one huge hand was wrapped around a heavy, short-barreled derringer. Drake swore that the old fool intended to brace it out this way, but he surged up after him. They'd have to make it together. As Drake came up, the old actor roared:

"Ha! The Duke's minions!"

With each staccato word, the gun in his hand spat. One of the two men at the head of the wagon reeled back, broke under the successive impacts, and spilled onto his face. The tall man dropped the hand which held the empty gun, his other hand palming its mate from his vest with smooth ease. But there was no target left for him.

Drake shot carefully. He tagged the man at the head of the team, and knocked down the second man in the trail at about the same time as the old actor dropped the first.

The tall man turned, pocketing his two guns quietly, and shoved his hand toward Drake.

"I, sir, am Christian Defever—some-what better known where the lights are bright than in these gloomy hills."

Drake gave his own name. Defever bowed, a difficult maneuver atop the loaded wagon. Then he looked down at the three masked men who lay in the dust with the driver. His great head shook sorrowfully.

"The flame of a man's life is a feeble beacon—" his head raised and Drake saw a wicked grin had slid across his face—"and he's a damned fool to stand in a draft! Eh, Scott?"

"This is going to make the Duke unhappy," Drake said dryly.

"Eh, the Duke? Oh, yes," Defever chuckled. "I wonder who he is. Think this camp's as bad as that jumble-jawed driver claimed?"

"The driver's dead—and there's three more like him."

"Um!" Defever said thoughtfully. He dragged out his derringer and loaded it from loose shells clinking in the pocket of his long coat. "I'm a prudent man, Scott. You understand that? We'll make a mite of furor, rolling this wagon into that camp ahead with carcasses sticking out all over it. I hadn't planned to go in that way."

Drake nodded. He knew what the man meant. His earlier measurement had been somewhere near the truth. Defever wanted to move quietly where he went.

"But I'll tell you this, smoke always makes me thirsty. And I'll play to a full house in tophet before I'll walk thirty miles back to Junction for a bottle! I've fought every duke in Shakespeare and there isn't one of them up to a good drink of whiskey! Can you handle those brutes in the harness?"

Drake didn't answer for a moment. This was what he was running from. Where there was violence, he was always drawn in. And out of it came only death, an addition to the lethal legends folks fashioned from the smoke of his gun, and a friendlessness which set him moving restlessly onward again.

Oro Grande camp was new. He had hoped for a new beginning in it. Yet it would be the start of old patterns—if he drove this wagon with its dead freight into it. There were forces at odds in the camp. He would have to choose a side and stick with it.

Alone, he would have turned back on the barren thirty-mile walk to Junction. And he would have been sure of the wisdom of so doing. But he couldn't look now at the sombre face of the tall man in front of him and be sure of anything, save that here was a man whose friendship would repay him a hundred times over for those which had been denied him in the past.

His lips twisted into a grin as reckless as Defever's could be, and he slid onto

the seat of the lumbering wagon.

CHAPTER TWO

Death—On Consignment

THERE were three things which brought real pleasure to Christian Defever: the electric, rib-squeezing smell of an audience beyond an unlimited curtain on an opening night; the satisfying devilry which sang in his blood when somebody else's trouble lay open and inviting before him, waiting for the prodding of his long nose and the work of his hands; and the occasional knowledge which came in his drifting that he had crossed the trail of a man who needed help.

The first of these he'd never know again. It lay behind him, back in the days of his youth, along with footlights and oil smoke, greasepaint and lamplit theatres. It was dead in his memory—had been for more than a dozen years. But the others were strong, now. Strong and compelling.

As young Drake Scott wheeled the heavy wagon into the foot of Oro Grande's up-tilted street, Defever checked details. He wanted this to be just right. It had to be for two reasons. First, he always did a neat job. It was his pride. And second, if he was going to straighten young Scott up, he'd have to teach him the right way to blend wisdom with his gift of violence.

The end-gate of the wagon was down. The tarp was drawn partially over it, but the feet of the four dead men in the back of the box stuck out from under it, their toes pointing skyward. Defever grinned to himself and stood on wide-planted legs among the limp boots on the end-gate. His beaver hat was pulled down solidly on his head, his hands were thrust deep into his trousers pockets, and his coat was unbuttoned so that its flowing length stirred and snapped behind him in the drifting wind.

As they moved further into the camp, curious eyes turned toward the wagon, caught by his bizarre figure. A few of the sharper glances also noted the four pairs of boots jutting out at his feet. Defever gave them all back stare for

stare. Shakespeare would have written an entry into this camp in this fashion. Defever knew he was making impact, and impact was what he now wanted.

He watched the crowd narrowly, measuring the reaction on each face until he found the one most obviously affected by what he saw. This one was a pudgy, resplendently dressed little man who waddled onto the walk from a doorway above which a sign advertised the Rocky Mountain Bank—miner's loans, assaying, and claim counselling.

The little man faltered for a full stride, his face blanching when he saw the wagon. Then he caught himself and came on down the walk. Defever vaulted from the wagon with the careless ease of a bony and hungry cat. He pushed up onto the walk and brought the pudgy man up short with a huge hand pressed against his fancy vest.

"Ah, the money-changer!" Defever said thunderingly.

The little man whittled his gaze down to sharp points. He seemed measuring, making up his mind, for a moment. Suddenly his lips parted. "You drunken fool!" he squeaked in a high-pitched voice. "I'm Jonas Frisbee and that's my bank. What's your business?"

Satisfaction warmed in Chris Defever. Good! A drunken fool! Excellent! The play was working. When you could keep a man guessing, and guessing wrong—

"None—with you!" he growled in answer. "Beware of the money-changers, for there is blood on their hands and guilt in their hearts! I want the man with the biggest breeches in this camp. Where'd I find him?"

Frisbee stood motionless, obviously aware of the crowd and uncertain whether the snickers which ran through it were for him or for the gray-maned scarecrow in front of him. Defever saw the banker resented this prodding and did not intend to answer. He watched the little man sharply. In spite of his intention, Frisbee's eyes shuttled unconsciously toward a low stone building set apart across the street.

Defever stepped back from the little man and bowed loosely. "You have, Sir," he said, "done me a service!"

He wheeled, then, and stepped back in-

to the street. From the seat of the wagon, Drake Scott looked down, his eyes narrowed. Defever grinned. The boy was all right! He was following the play. Maybe a little behind, but following. He waved his arm for Scott to bring the wagon on.

The stone building toward which Jonas Frisbee had glanced bore a terse legend across its front above small, deep-set windows:

MINER'S ASSOCIATION

As Defever reached the walk before it, Drake Scott pulled the wagon up and climbed down beside him. The door of the Association building opened and a man came out. Defever measured him an inch shorter than himself, but heavy as a strong man is heavy. His face was straight-lined and no flicker of thought was betrayed by his washed eyes. Chris tabbed him automatically. This man was death—a sure and calculating death to any who opposed him.



THIS whole play on entry into town had been designed to split Oro Grande in half. Men were accustomed to ordinary travellers coming among them, and such arrivals didn't make them drop their guards so a stranger could look at them closely. Defever had hoped the furor of the arriving wagon, its freight, and himself, would jolt opposing forces so he could identify them. Jonas Frisbee had been jolted. Defever was reasonably sure of him, now. But this man from the stone building didn't flicker an eye.

"You boys are kicking up quite a ruckus," he suggested tolerantly. "Pull the wagon around back. Then I'll buy you a drink."

Defever took off his hat, brushed at its felt with his sleeve, and clapped it back on his hear. "When I am drunk, Sir," he said stiffly, "you'll know it. You'll not have to guess. And I buy my own drinks in a strange town. A natural caution. As for this wagon, you take it. I think it's freight belongs to you!" He jerked the tarp back, revealing four bodies.

Drake Scott pushed a little forward. "As Shakespeare would say," Drake muttered, "the wages of sin is death!"

A silent chuckle shook Defever. The boy was missing his cue a little, but he was playing it straight.

The association man scowled and bent over the wagon-box with detached care. Finally he turned back to Defever. "I'm Ed Paravane. Any of those say they were my boys?"

Scott spoke again, from Paravane's elbow. "Do they look talkative?" His voice was flat and dry.

Paravane turned sharply on him and stared.

This was good, also. Defever's satisfaction grew. Like it or not, Oro Grande was in for some first class helping with its troubles. Young Scott was a smart student. Chris doubted if Drake understood how the game ought to go, as yet, but he did know enough to realize the importance of making Paravane and any others watching realize that two men had come in on the wagon—not one!

Paravane's gaze clung to Scott for a stiff moment. Then relief touched his face. He let a smile pull slightly at his lips and he swung his head to Defever.

"No. I reckon they didn't talk. I'll set you straight. Mistakes are easy to make in this camp—and dangerous! The little one's the owner of this wagon. The other three must have jumped him. They're trouble-makers who were kicked out of the association. This is their way of hitting back—if they could have carried it off. How'd it happen?"

"There are gods who watch over traveling men," Chris said ponderously, "And the hands of the gods are heavy!" He flexed his own huge fists, looked at them, and chuckled. He let this drive home.

Then he turned to Drake Scott as though their business with Paravane, the camp, the wagon, and its contents, was finished. His head tipped back and his wide nostrils flared, keening the wind.

"Ah, whiskey!" he breathed. "The blood of the living and the curse of the dead! You have a few shekels, Scott?"

"A few—" Drake agreed guardedly.

Defever laughed and slapped him on the back. The boy was suddenly remembering that he had known his companion

a matter of hours and that this could be a shakedown. Chris liked the caution. Scott, would, he decided, make the best kind of a fighting man when he learned the finer points.

"Son, look: sober, we'll be asked questions; drunk, we can't answer them. The last man to belly up to a bar—buys the drinks!"

Chris spun, then, clapped a hand up to steady his hat, and sprinted off across the street toward the slatted doors of the Bonanza Bar. With his long legs pumping, his coat flying, and his big feet spurning up dust at every stride, he cut a ridiculous figure. But this was good, in many ways his strongest weapon. The crowd laughed openly at him.

Turning his head, he saw that young Scott and Ed Paravane did not, Scott was trotting in his tracks. Paravane stood thoughtfully still beside the wagon which had been delivered to him. And these were important signs. Chris now knew that Scott would stick with him. And he knew he had found the curly wolf of Oro Grande. There remained only to force Paravane into the first move. The rest would lie thereafter in the hands of the gods and a gunsmoke trouper's luck.

CHAPTER THREE

Vest-Pocket Poker

DRAKE bought three rounds of drinks in quick succession at the Bonanza. He gave this up, then, and bought a bottle. Christian Defever seemed to drink with the same appetite and flourish with which he did everything else. They took the bottle to a corner table where Defever continued a steady slugging away of the whiskey which gave no time for words and lowered the level of the bottle amazingly.

Drake stayed with him till he felt the fumes in his head and knew that the pummeling of the ride on the wagon and a shortage of sleep were catching up with him. His companion, however, went steadily on, seeming to grow more lively with each glass.

At the end of a half hour he began to taper off a little and he leaned across the table.

"See any signs along the street of a headquarters of that Silca Syndicate the driver was muttering about?"

Drake shook his head. "No," he said idly. "Didn't expect to. Its probably a night-riding outfit, working under cover."

Defever nodded. "Yes, I figure so myself. But it won't stay there, son. Did you think of this? We killed three men. Five gets you ten they were Syndicate hands. So there's a score hanging against us. Somebody's likely to pay it off—or try to!"

Drake sat up. "Paravane?"

"Maybe," Defever agreed. "A wolf-dog and a wolf both have sharp teeth. Paravane's looked sharp enough. I'd like to know."

Drake scowled. Out on the trail he'd wanted to by-pass any trouble which lay in this camp. He knew, now, that Christian Defever hadn't been running from trouble—he'd been hunting it. The crazy old devil lived on trouble. There was a strange kind of magic in Defever, a magnetism he couldn't resist. He knew he should get up, now, hire a horse, and quit the hills. But he couldn't. A something he thought he'd completely purged himself of in his drifting was binding him to the man across the table—an eager, animal awareness of impending conflict.

"So would I!" he growled.

Defever's grin widened, as though the answer had been some kind of a test he had passed with the man.

"Then empty your pockets!" he commanded. "And watch those two games. Tell me which dealer plays closest to the edge."

Drake glanced sharply up. He hadn't known Defever more than a few hours and he knew a whetted cleverness lurked behind the large, bland eyes. He wasn't well heeled, himself. What cash he did have, he'd need till he was set in a job again. But the wicked eagerness of his companion's grin drew him in. He knew there was planning back of it and that he'd have to buy chips, just to see what the play was. He passed a thin wad of bills across the table and turned his eyes to the two games going in the room.

One of them was a small-stake play, obviously a time-killer with no blood involved. The other, with four men at the

table in addition to the dealer, was being run by a ferret-faced little man with a broad streak of silver down through the center of his hair and the quickest hands Drake had ever seen. He watched two deals and knew this man was as crooked as a snake's back. He said so.

Defever shot a look of approval at him.

"You know cards, too!" He stopped. "Scott, we can get out, now, and we'd not be bothered. I wanted you to know that I know that. Or we can stay. Clean, this camp might be a good spot for a tired man to stop in. The way it is, its a fair place to die. The gods fashion the fate of honest men; rogues fashion their own! It's our choice."

Defever nodded. His liking for Defever was growing steadily. He liked having this chance offered, this admission made that they were committed to nothing in Oro Grande. But better than these things, he liked the unspoken promise of devilry and recklessness in Defever's rich voice. "We'll stay!" he answered. Chris Defever stood up.

"Then I'll buy a hand in that game!"



AN HOUR later, Scott's wad of bills was gone. They lay in a huge pot centering the table. All six players were riding grimly on tight hands. Standing clear of the table, Drake could see three sets of cards and knew that the push would be close. Four of the players, obviously miners trying to double stakes, were taut and damp with sweat. Christian Defever was leaned back, apparently in the grip of the drowsiness against which Drake had been fighting all evening.

The bottle, which Defever had carried into the game with him, sat empty on the floor beside his chair. He should have been stupidly drunk and there was little to indicate that he wasn't. Drake felt an occasional uneasiness over this, but forced himself to keep clear of his companion's play, whatever it might be.

The dealer, whom Scott had watched hawkishly from the beginning, looked long at his own cards. Then his head swung, measuring the tightness of his fellow players. He smiled faintly when his

eyes touched Defever's loose body. And with that smile, his fingers telescoped the pasteboards in his hands. The movement was automatic, smooth, and unstudied. Even Drake wasn't sure. But Defever was. He surged suddenly upright.

A yard away, a man in miner's gear but with smooth hands, wheeled quickly toward the table. Drake stepped back a foot to keep a line on him. And Defever's voice rolled sonorously through the room. There was no thickness on his tongue and his eyes were clear and sharp.

"Cards in a sleeve-clip! Get up, you spindle-fingered faker!" he roared at the dealer. "Get up and roll your right sleeve!"

Color drained from the ferret-faced

hit the floor at the same time. For a long moment there was no breath in the room. Then Defever pushed his cards out onto the table. The other players looked at them and shook their heads. Defever dropped his gun back into his vest and raked the pot into one of the deep pockets of his coat.

Drake stood fixedly, holding the room quiet with his unsheathed piece until his companion had cleaned the table and turned toward the door. Then he followed.

They reached the street together.

Defever laughed. "Even Shakespeare never wrote anything smoother than that, Scott!" He jingled the silver in his pocket.

Tom W. Blackburn, author of this story you are now reading, will be with us again next month with "The Fur Rebellion"—a highly dramatic, colorful story of the rough-and-ready Northwest. It's the feature novelette for October 10 STORY WESTERN. Don't miss it!

man's features. When it came back, it was ruddy with anger. He sat immobile for a moment, refusing to be hurried. His glance flickered the man in miner's gear at Chris Defever's back. Chris seemed unaware of him. His eyes were fixed on the dealer.

The dealer started a slow smile across his face. And at the same instant, he moved. It was a quick, wicked move, a jerk of his right arm. A small gun leaped from his sleeve, spilling cards as it came. He raised it smoothly. There was incredible speed in the whole thing. Christian Defever seemed suddenly big and awkward, a blustering bag of wind caught short. Even Drake didn't see Chris move a muscle. Yet one of the derringers was in his hand and snapping out its quick, four-snarled roll of sound before the dealer's arm was more than half raised.

At the same instant the man in the miner's rig jerked a heavy gun from the belt on his thigh and shoved it out at Defever's spine. Drake rocked a little, throwing his own iron clear, and shattered the man's face.

The man behind Defever and the dealer

"We're set, now, son. And we could do with some sleep. The best room in the hotel for us. A big one. We'll need it. We'll have company!"

"Company?"

Defever nodded. "The Duke. Remember? We've made ourselves a name. First the boys on the wagon. Now this pair. He'll want us. We do the kind of work he needs for his Silica Syndicate. And when he comes, then we'll know for sure who he is and maybe how he works!"

Drake swore feelingly. He had long thought he knew all the rules of gun-smoke gambling. But Defever had topped him effortlessly. The old devil had deliberately singled out a crooked game so that a gambler's code of justice would cover his play. And he had held his seat until his chance came to kill a man. When that chance came, he took it coolly—and only to draw the head of the syndicate working the shadows of Oro Grande into an offer for the hire of his gun!

Drake Scott had seen ruthlessness before. Ruthlessness in men who wanted something and knew no barriers in reaching it. Defever was not one of these.

Yet he was more terrible than any of them. And for the first time Drake began to understand the weird pattern of this strange man's life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bid for Fighting Guns

ONCE in the hotel room, Drake Scott rolled onto one of the two beds and slid easily off into the deep sleep of physical weariness. Christian Defever slid off his thin shoes and sprawled out on the other bed, luxuriously curling and uncurling his long toes. But aside from his shoes, he lay fully dressed, and he didn't sleep. He had a strong aversion to being awakened by anything but the sun, once he had closed his eyes, and he knew that neither Drake nor himself would be able to sleep entirely through this night.

Speculation was pleasant in the darkness. There was a small lump of warmth in his belly where the bottle of whiskey Drake had bought now rested. And there was satisfaction in him for the way their play had come off in the Bonanza. The bait was out. Presently the wolf would come sniffing. . . .

Two days ago, at Junction, he had lain like this in a far shabbier hotel room, lost in thought, also. Then he had been mulling over the vague and ugly rumors filtering down from the new camp of Oro Grande, in the hills to the west. Rumors of pre-empted claims—of violence and death. He had measured them carefully. Clearly they indicated there was work for him. But they also indicated that the wolves of the Oro Grande hills were strong. Strong enough to make him uneasy.

That night in Junction, he had been casting about for an ally, somebody to back him up. And he had been hopeless about it. He had traveled his own trail long enough alone to know that few men loved a fight so well or set justice so high that they'd take up a strange camp's quarrel without a personal stake in the battle. When he left his room the next morning, he believed that, at last, he had run against one risk he couldn't take, one battle he'd have to pass by. The odds at Oro Grande

were too high for him to face alone.

Then he had seen Drake Scott bargaining with the driver of the freight wagon for passage into the hills. And his hunch came—a hunch that this youngster was the man he needed. He knew that Drake was running, running from the name plastered to a man with a too-quick gun. He had also known that before Drake was of use to him, he'd have to make him see that the name he hated was an asset with which he could win a solid place and many friends.

Part of that was done. Defever knew this when Drake Scott chose to stay in the camp. But there was more to it, yet. There was a sensitiveness in Drake which could yet be troublesome. Chris Defever was considering this, his eyes idly on the sleeping man across the room, when the door was flung suddenly and silently open.

Defever grunted at his own carelessness in not setting the lock. But he lay motionless. Ed Paravane stood in the doorway, his gun leveled menacingly. Three others were behind him. Paravane stepped a little to one side and they slid past him. One rifled Chris' vest of its two solid little guns. A second crossed to Drake Scott. Scott snapped wide awake in an instant. But his gun was gone and he checked himself.

Paravane smiled in the doorway, pushed the panel close behind him, and stopped in the center of the room. "I wanted to talk to you two," he said. He stopped and nodded at Defever's derringers and Drake's Colt in the hands of his men. "I wanted to be sure I had a chance to. Now, forget it!"

Chris Defever sat up and swung his stockinged feet to the floor. He eyed Paravane. "Talk? About what?"

Paravane's smile widened. "I knew Scott right off. I heard about him months ago when he killed Barney Clayton at Leadville. That was a piece of work, too! But I couldn't place, you, Defever. I couldn't add you in. A jumble-jawed, bony-kneed old boomer in a beaver hat! You're smart. You don't look your play! Then one of my boys came up with the story of how a gent like you cleaned up Thrace Walker's Bitter Basin gang. And I began to remember other yarns. Oro Grande has drawn itself a

slick pair of dueces wild. . . . Why?"

"The climate!" Drake Scott said that—hard and brittle words in the room. Chris Defever smiled faintly.

Paravane swung his head. "Maybe, bucko!" he agreed silkily. "Maybe you two've got ideas. That can wait. You put on your show for me. I've got one for you. Then we'll talk. Come here!"

Paravane crossed to the window and drew back the curtain. Chris followed him. Drake rose from the bed and crossed over, also.

The street of Oro Grande camp lay silent below them. But from the hills above, a sound was running down. It grew and presently a light wagon rolled out of the shadows and turned down between the buildings. A masked man drove it. Three other masked men rode beside it, one of them leading a fourth saddled horse. They came on quietly into the center of town. The wagon drew up before the Bonanza and the driver climbed down to make the team fast to the rail in front of the saloon. This done, he swung to the saddle of the led horse. The four riders milled into the center of the street. Suddenly all of them jerked their guns. Sudden thunder rocked between the buildings and muzzle-flame spat skyward.

After a dozen shots, the four riders sheathed their pieces and raced back in the direction from which they had come. Doors opened along the street. A man came out with a lantern. Then another. A crowd formed and ran down toward the Bonanza. One of the lanterns was held high over the little wagon at the rail.

Chris could see in its light that a man's body lay in the box. One man in the crowd, the pudgy little banker, Jonas Frisbee, reached in and tore loose a square of white which had been pinned to the dead man's chest.

Paravane let the curtain fall back, blotting out the scene.

"This afternoon the Silica Syndicate filed on Claim Seventeen, claiming title was transferred to it. The filing was made by an envelope slipped under the back door of the Association. Association records show Claim Seventeen belongs to Tim Burgess. That is Burgess' body down there—and the paper Fris-

bee pulled off of him is a relinquishment of title—in his own handwriting!"

"The mill of the gods grinds slowly—" Chris murmured.

"Not Ed Paravane's!" the man snapped. "You two pick your berth. This is one place that won't take a cleaning. Ride with the Syndicate, or draw your cards—now!"



DEFEVER'S eyes were on Drake Scott. The younger man made no apparent move, but Chris sensed a slight shaking of his head and a plea for a distraction. Chris turned as though to move back to his original seat on the side of the bed. As he did so, he deliberately thrust his foot hard against one leg of the bedstead. It sent a quick hurt shooting through his stockinged toes, but it also threw him off-balance as effectively and innocently as though the stubbing had been on purpose. He staggered and crashed against Paravane, knocking him against the nearest of his men.

At the same time, Drake Scott moved. His hand slid under the edge of his mattress, finding a precarious grip, and the whole weight of his body went into a frantic surge. The mattress came up off of the bed and sailed across the room, catching Paravane's two other men under its muffling weight. Drake followed it, kicked a man's leg showing below it, and broke a gun from a slackened grip as the man fought staggeringly free.

Drake's first shot tagged this man. His second, meant for Paravane, missed. But it drove the man back and into reach of Defever's arms. A huge maul of a fist crashed glancingly against the side of Paravane's head, slamming him flat. Chris leaped across him, one stockinged foot coming down on his wrist and forcing the gun from his grip.

As he straightened with the weapon, Chris saw a third man trying to line the unfamiliar balance of one of his own derringers at him. He swung Paravane's weapon in a short arc and let it go. It struck the fellow in the face and dropped him. Scott came on across the room, dropping his gun-barrel down across the head of the fourth man, as Chris bent to re-

trieve his two beloved little derringers.

In sixty seconds they were in the hall, running soundlessly past rooms already beginning to stir with a reaction to the sound of the shots and the quick racket of the brief battle. They hit the stairs at full stride, Drake in the lead and Defever close behind him, running still in his stockings with his hat and his shoes caught up under one arm.

The lobby of the hotel was empty and they spilled out onto the porch. Here Drake pulled sharply up. The crowd about the wagon across the street was staring up at the window from which the sound of the shots had come. But they were rooted. Defever realized Scott had seen some danger on the street. He shoved up beside him. Then he saw.

Seven or eight men, all of them masked and swiftly moving as though earlier placed for this purpose, were converging on the hotel.

Chris grunted. "Paravane! Coppered his bets. The back way, quick!"

Drake wheeled. As Chris turned, he saw one figure detach itself from the crowd across the street and begin an awkward, waddling run, surprising for its speed, toward a vacant lot beside the hotel.

As Scott and himself ducked back toward the kitchen of the hotel, he wondered briefly if Jason Frisbee had lost his head at the sudden appearance of the masked men or if he ran for a purpose. A moment later a scattered burst of firing broke out on the street and he knew Frisbee was having his trouble, whatever his purpose in breaking away from the rest in front of the Bonanza.

Scott and Defever shot out the back door of the hotel at a full run. Almost at the same moment, four men rounded the far corner of the hotel. Guns crashed among them. Angry lead scorched along the wall. Chris shoved Drake off in the opposite direction and they sprinted frantically. As they cleared the wall of the building and streaked out into the lot which lay beside it, a thin, high-pitched whisper stabbed at them.

"Here, this way!"

Frisbee!

Chris touched Drake's shoulder again, turning him. The little banker was run-

ning ahead of them. They fell in with him, passed behind two more buildings, and came to the rear of the bank. Some of the other masked men from the street had joined those at the rear of the hotel, and one of them had a rifle. It was black along the rear of the buildings, but the man had an uncanny eye. Lead passed between Drake and Chris to splinter against the stone of the bank building and painfully powder Frisbee with fragments as he swiftly fitted a key, twisted it, and swung the door open.

A moment later they were in the building with the heavy portal shut tight and barred behind them.

"Whence help comes, there also are true friends!" Defever panted. "Why, Frisbee?"

The little banker had his shirt open, looking down under one arm at a long, red-dripping crease which scored the fat bulginess of his white skin. He looked up and grinned.

"Maybe I saw you play Hamlet when I was a kid."

Chris Defever was proud of his last ten years of wandering; not so proud of what had gone before. Maybe he was a good man with his little guns; certainly he had been a bad actor. Even if Frisbee had happened to see him play the boards in those early years, he wouldn't remember him now. The performance would have been too poor to stick in a man's memory.

"That's no answer!" he snapped.

Frisbee's grin widened. "You're right. Well, then, you two are the answer to a prayer some of us have been making in this camp. And you're worth saving!"

"We're no good alone!"

Frisbee nodded. "You won't be! A banker's business is banking, and a miner's business is mining. It takes a little time for either to change to something else. A camp like this has to breathe a little gunsmoke before it gets mad—gunsmoke burned on its side. You've done that for us. And Paravane's done the rest. Most of the boys he's tackled have signed his relinquishment notices after a little beating. And the rest of the camp couldn't raise much fight over claims their owners wouldn't put up a fight for. Tim Burgess was different. His was the discovery claim. He had friends among us. It took

Tim a long time to get around to writing out that notice the syndicate pinned on him. You can tell just how long by looking at how much it took to make him die. Oro Grande has looked. We'll have company before dawn—and more guns!"

Frisbee, small and fat and ungainly, had dignity now. His shrill, thin voice rang prophetically and with a terrible, quiet anger. Christian Defever remembered he had tried to make a fool of the little banker when Scott and himself brought the freight wagon in. He had tried to make a fool of him because Chris, himself, had a drifter's scorn of banking men. The effort had failed. And Defever was glad. This little man was the heart of Oro Grande.

CHAPTER FIVE

Payoff—In Glory

DAWN came thin and streaking across the camp. Buildings became progressively deeper blots of shadow in the night blackness, gray silhouettes in the first gray light, and finally clearly-lined shapes along the street. But the street, itself, was empty.

Christian Defever and Frisbee were both dozing in armed chairs dragged into the back room from Frisbee's office. A heavy silence lay over Oro Grande. The masked men which had driven toward the hotel had vanished after trailing their quarry to the back door of the bank building and trying its latch. Although the front of the hotel was masked by the angle of the street, it was reasonable to suppose Ed Paravane and such of his three companions as had been able to walk, had quitted the hotel, probably circling back to hole up in their Silica Syndicate.

Scott, sharpened by the brief nap which had been interrupted by Paravane at the hotel, did not sleep. He moved with restless silence through Frisbee's bank building, watching guardedly through the small, barred windows. He knew Defever was sleeping easily, his full trust put in Frisbee's promise that the camp would rise to follow their leadership.

As the light grew, he waited with growing impatience for the sleeping men to rouse. Frisbee had been wrong about Oro

Grande. It had dug itself a deep hole and pulled the entry in after it. What was to be done on the streets of the camp during this day would be done without the men whose interests were at stake.

Drake's thoughts were turned inward in the morning silence. He had come again to the same barrier he had so often crossed. The wolves were at the sheep. The long-geared old man snoring heavily in the chair across the room and himself could face the syndicate. They could make a try at cleaning Oro Grande. It might be done. It might not. The risk was wholly theirs. If they failed, the camp wouldn't even crawl out of its hole to bury them. If they succeeded, the town would turn on them. Not intentionally, perhaps, but certainly.

Mothers would gather their kids in off of the street when they passed. Little boys would follow them along the walks, half in fear and half in worship. Lithe girls, prettying for other men, would eye them with stark, unpleasant aversion and turn away. Men would drink with them, speak with cautious meaningfulness of greener valleys to be found beyond the mountains, and avoid asking them to their homes.

Once Drake Scott had believed that there was glory for a fighting man who took up another's just battle. He did not believe this, now. And he began to wonder at himself that he had let the gangling, quotation-spouting old drifter across the room talk him into sticking on here, wading into a repetition of the same rewardless play which had kept him without ties and restlessly moving since the day he had first turned his gun on a man and found it fast. . . .

It was nearly eight o'clock when Jonas Frisbee awakened. His stir roused Defever. The old boomer had been sleeping heavily, yet when he opened his eyes, he might have been awake and alert throughout the night, so completely did his faculties sharpen with that single movement of his eyelids. Christian Defever stretched enjoyably.

"A man who dies at morning goes swiftly to his gods!" he said. His keen old eyes snapped to Drake. "What stirs?"

Drake shrugged and spoke acridly. "A hundred miners came out of the ground

and caught Paravane's syndicate with their bare hands! The whole works of them are hanging in a row in front of their building!"

Defever ignored the bitter sarcasm. "They didn't show?" He glanced at Frisbee. The little man nodded. Defever grinned. "Then I reckon Paravane's safe. Eh, Drake?"

Drake scowled. So even the old boomer was checking the bet to him, now! A slow and stubborn anger surged up in him. All right, he'd split his trail right here, then!

"It looks like it," he agreed tightly. "And it suits me. A town that won't fight for its own skin can go to the devil its own way as far as I'm concerned!"

"I've got a notion the driver of that freight wagon would have fought a mite if he'd had a chance," Defever said softly. "Those miners in the Bonanza would have busted that crooked dealer in half if they'd caught him at his tricks before I called him on them. And I've got a notion Tim Burgess gave those masked jaspers a bad time before he finally signed that relinquishment notice and turned in his chips!"

"Maybe!" Drake grunted. "But a freight driver and a beaten claim-owner and some miners in a game ain't a whole camp. And what they faced wasn't Paravane's whole outfit. Do what you want, Defever. I'm sitting here till dark. There'll be a let-up in the watching, then. And maybe the chance will come right. I'm getting out the back way and over the ridges when it does!"

Defever shrugged, but his eyes plumbed deeply into Drake.



THE day dragged slowly. Drake found a place back of a front window which left him unexposed from the street and yet gave him a fair view of the camp. During the early afternoon, a handful of gravel rattled against a rear window. Jonas Frisbee went back to the casement and opened it a little, talking in soft, swift sentences with a man lying in the weeds back of the building. A little later Drake's restless eyes began to mark small movements here and there through

the town. His interest rose a notch.

Sunlight winked on a rifle barrel and directly he made out a man crouched behind the chimney of the smithy a few yards up the street. There was a man with another gun occasionally silhouetted back of a second-floor window in the building next to the Bonanza Bar. And he thought two more men were lying in the weathered box of a wheelless wagon beside the livery stable. These things meant nothing to him beyond the cautiousness of a town afraid to fight. Here was the makings of a good striking force, spread out wholly for defense.

The syndicate crew clung to their haven in the Miner's Association building. It was a deadlock. Drake roiled with inner restlessness. It wasn't his fight and he was getting out of it. But if there was one man in this town worth his salt, he'd get his neighbors together before the sun was gone and make some sort of a diversion that would pull Paravane's force into the open. Then, at least, this nerve fraying waiting would be done. And if the camp lost, it would have made a fight.

Sunset was but minutes away when Drake finally grew weary of watching the street and started to draw back from his window. As he did so, four men appeared simultaneously from four different directions—bursting up from shelter in a ring around the stone building across the street. Each of them carried a torch. Their intent was plain.

It was foolhardy, but there was magnificence in it. A frantic, lethal hail of lead leaped from the Association building at them. The first one went down before he'd run twenty feet, his torch still smoking beyond his outstretched hand. Another was hit, then another. The fourth was staggering, but he held on. Distance cut down. A bullet wheeled him completely in his tracks, but he drove himself on. And with a last terrible effort, flung his torch.

For a moment it looked as if it would fall short. Then it cleared the wall of the Association building and burned brightly on the roof. The evening wind caught the flames, spreading them. Drake watched the fire with a tightness growing in him. Finally, he knew the building would go, and he straightened at his window. A

huge, bony hand fell on his shoulder. "The back way'll be clear, now," Christian Defever said softly.

Drake shrugged his hand away. He knew the old boomer was right. Now was the time to run. But he couldn't.

"Wait!" he said. Defever moved back into the bank. Drake could hear him talking softly with Frisbee.

The flames on the roof of the Association building grew brighter as they ate through the shakes of the roof. Then a section fell, and the flaming timbers inside smoked out the wolves.

They came through the door unhurriedly, moving in a tight formation, only scattered enough to lessen their target without reducing the impact of their concerted fire. At the same instant, from down toward the hotel, a party of townsmen appeared. They were bunched too tightly. They were hurrying too fast. And they were outnumbered two-to-one. Drake Scott swore. Paravane would empty the town—and it wouldn't cost him much. Drake swore again. And a moment later he had batted the bar up

across the bank's front door and stepped through the opening into the street.

He was as crazy as the outnumbered townsmen and he knew it. But there was a need for him here and he couldn't run away from it, no matter how those he fought for looked at him afterward. His gun came up and he dropped a man beside Ed Paravane.

The syndicate saw him, then. Paravane split his force, angling with four or five of them toward the bank and letting the bulk hold on down the street toward the townsmen. For the first time in his life Drake Scott regretted the fact he only carried one gun. He fired again, dropped another man, and took a hurt which numbed his left side.

He felt sick. Then a familiar sound rapped out beside him. The short, full roar of a pocket derringer. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Christian Defever, his beaver hat on the top of his gray mane, his coat flapping in the wind, and his two hands full of smoking iron. And beyond Defever, waddling steadily forward and working the lever of a hip-



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held Winchester with every stride, was Jonas Frisbee.

A grim scythe cut through the ranks of the syndicate. Those moving toward the townsmen stopped uncertainly. Paravane bellowed at them. Christian Defever's vest guns continued to talk. Drake knew other men were dropping, that he had been hit, himself again. He could see nothing of the street but one man's face. Ed Paravane seemed to have marked him out. Death brushed close again, smashing his hat from his head. There was one load left in Drake's gun. He stopped advancing. He spread his legs wide. And he raised his piece into line with concentrated care. Paravane fired at him again and missed. Drake's grip tightened and his weapon bucked. Paravane dropped his weapon, turned a quarter around, and tore open his shirt.

Across the dozen yards which separated them, Drake Scott saw the red stain growing on the white skin of the man's chest. Paravane looked a long moment, then stiffened and pitched forward. He seemed to fall hard, hard enough to shake Drake from his own footing.



DRAKE SCOTT roused to the strangest circle of faces he had ever seen. There were one or two among them familiar ones he remembered seeing in the Bonanza or on the street. The others were like them, plain faces, miners' faces, townsmen's faces. But all of them had the same strange cast. For a long time he couldn't figure it out.

Then recognition dawned. It was admiration. Admiration and gratitude and the growing warmth which comes before friendship. These men had seen the peculiar violence of his gunplay and seemed untouched by it. He was puzzled. Jonas Frisbee pushed through them. He had something in his hand. He dropped it on the bed. Drake picked it up with his unbandaged arm.

It was a star. A small, rough-finished star fashioned of iron. Its pin was so big it would make a devil of a hole in a man's shirt. He knew somehow what it was. The smith had hammered it out of scrap at his anvil. Oro Grande had nothing

better. And he liked it because it had no shine. He looked up. Frisbee grinned.

"The Committee For Law And Order," he said, waving his hand at the circle of faces. "We want you, Scott!"

Eagerness flamed in Drake momentarily. Then it died. His gun-belt hung across a chair. He pointed at it. "That's what you want!"

Frisbee shook his head. "No, son," he said. "Oro Grande's a clean camp, now. You won't need your iron. It's a job and friends in a town that'll grow—and that needs you."

Drake swung his head around the room. One face was missing. A long, horsey face under a shaggy, long-bobbed mane of gray hair. Frisbee seemed to understand that searching look. He said something to the man next to him. The word passed and the Committee filed out the door. When they were gone, Frisbee pulled a chair close.

"He waited till we'd voted on you. Then he borrowed a horse and rode out. South, he said. But he took the north trail. If you never had a friend before, you had one when you came here. There's something you ought to know. We were ready to hit Paravane all day. But Christian Defever wouldn't let us. Said he'd not raise a gun if we hurried your chance to settle a fight you were making with yourself.

"He never blinked an eye when he tallied our count and found we'd cleaned the syndicate completely. But he grinned when we took our vote!"

Frisbee fell thoughtfully silent. A deep gratitude ran through Scott. He was sorry he couldn't shake Christian Defever's hand. But he knew it was best, this way. The running was done, and the friendlessness. And he knew, now, the difference between a gunman and a warrior. One sells his lead for gold; the other for glory!

He remembered one of Defever's mouth-filling phrases:

"There are gods who watch over traveling men—"

Frisbee nodded. "Tall ones—with big feet and vest-pocket guns!" he said. "Want to shave now or after you get up to my house? I'm moving you up there tonight. . . ."

*A bragging killer scoffed so loudly at the deeds of famous gunmen—
that he failed to hear . . .*

THE OWLHOOT'S WHISPER

A Short Short Story

By

MORGAN

LEWIS



"Where did you hide your dust?"

THE wiry, hatchet faced man in the lead, reined his horse into an open spot on the side of the trail away from the canyon. "Time to eat," he said.

Pop Trent pulled up beside him, stepped stiffly from the saddle with a sigh of relief. They had been on the move since daybreak and Pop's old muscles were

saddle weary. "Them's sweet words, Squint," he said.

The hatchet faced man didn't answer but began to rake dry limbs together for a fire.

Pop opened the coffee sack, sifted some into the pot. Then he carefully replaced it on his saddle and went to the spring for water. And all the while his mind was being pounded by the problem of how to stretch twenty-five hundred dollars to five thousand.

That's what the letter said . . . five thousand. Medical school cost like hell.

He came back and set the pot by the fire. He squatted near it and studied Squint's hatchet face with the pale gray eyes. It wasn't a generous face. Pop sighed. Between them, they had five thousand dollars worth of gold dust but he didn't reckon Squint would lend him his half.

He fished in his shirt pocket for the makings—and looked up to stare into the black hole of a .44.

"Where did you hide your dust?" Squint's pale eyes were unwinking behind the big gun.

Pop's hand started for his hip but he checked the move. . . . He wasn't that good!

"You aimin' to rob me, Squint?" he asked in a low voice and stared hard at the other man.

Squint's thin mouth crooked at one corner. "What's it look like? . . . You could've saved your hide by not hidin' your poke. I went through your stuff last night, aimin' to take it and pull out. Now I gotta do it the hard way!"

Pop carefully folded his big veined hands in his lap. "I seen plenty lowdown hombres in my day," he said, "but you're just about the lowest. Ain't I bin tellin' you how bad I need that dust so's Johnny can get to be a doc?"

Squint permitted himself a thin chuckle. "You're a fine one to talk. 'Cordin' to your own words, you ain't seen Johnny since he was five. . . . You was too busy ridin' the owlhoot."

Pop winced. Those biting words of Squint's had hit into a tender place. He *hadn't* been much of a father to the boy. Wracked by bitter desolation when his wife died, he had shipped the lad to relatives back east. Good, honest folks but not blessed with too much of this world's good!

Then, seeking to still the aching longing for the voice he would never hear again, he had taken to the outlaw trail. It had brought grim excitement and danger—and money which had been freely spent, except for the amounts he had sent back for Johnny's keep. Always, he had managed that.

Now he knew that it hadn't paid. The way he had chosen had been the wrong way. Too old to longer hear the owlhoot,

he had drifted into prospecting and managed to earn a precarious living—with the big strike always just ahead. At last he had struck color but dwindling supplies had forced him back to town.

There he had found a letter from Johnny telling, almost apologetically, of his chance to go to a famous medical school. Did Pop think he could manage the money? It would take four or five thousand dollars.

Pop's wide old shoulders had sagged. It might as well have been millions. He had put in sleepless nights, tossing on his bunk, trying to find a way out. It was the first time the boy had ever asked for anything important and Pop would cheerfully have given a leg in order to come through.

But there was no way out. Johnny would have a beard down to his knees by the time Pop got that much money—unless he could get a grub-stake to go back and work the lead he had uncovered. That might solve all his problems.

Desperately, earnestly, he had tried, only to find that his credit was exhausted, that in his flat-broke condition people had no confidence in him.



THEN one night he had met a newcomer, Squint, and strangely, the man had listened. Pop told his tale and the sharp faced man had agreed to put up money for supplies, to go along on a fifty-fifty basis. More from a desire to lose himself in the hills for a while, Pop had thought, than from any real hope of finding gold.

From a deep knowledge of men, Pop had instinctively distrusted Squint but there was no other choice. He had written Johnny to sit tight. They had headed for the hills, found the vein but it yielded only five thousand before it petered out . . . and Pop was still twenty-five hundred short.

Despite the gun pointing at him, he grinned bitterly inside as he thought of how he had been wondering if Squint would lend him his share.

Squint's thin lips flattened. "Where's your dust?" His voice was edged with impatience.

Pop shook his head wearily. "Where you'll never find it. I reckoned you might

try a skunk trick like this—so I hid it.”

Heat flared in Squint's pale eyes. “You old fool,” he said thinly, “do you think you can get away with a dodge like that? Wherever it is you'll damn well get it!”

A gust of wind scurried down trail, rattling dry leaves before it. Overhead a V of geese heading south was etched against a sky the color of gray steel. Summer was dead and soon snow would be whipping through the hills, filling the draws with its chill white. Pop shivered under his thin shirt.

“That's poor payment,” he said slowly.

Squint smiled acidly. “You were a fool to think I'd split. I was just through with a job that paid off in real dough and I needed a chance to hole up for a while. You was handy.” He leaned forward. “You give me your poke or you'll be pickin' lead out of your teeth!”

Pop shook his head. “I can't . . . I hid it back by the cabin.”

Anger worked in Squint's face. His finger tightened on the trigger. “Don't try, none of your worn-out tricks on me!” he warned. “We'll go back and get it. Give me your gun—but first!”

Pop hesitated. “If I don't come back the folks in town will want to know what happened to me.”

Squint gestured impatiently and Pop slowly reached for his gun with his left hand. Squint watched him with hawklike intensity. Pop wrapped his fingers around the end of the butt, drew it from the holster. “Did you ever hear of Henry Plummer and the Road-Agents gang?” he asked mildly.

Squint snorted. “They was before my time—a bunch of broken-down saddle bums! A gang of today would cut 'em down before they could touch leather.”

Pop sighed and laid the barrel of the gun in his right palm. “I used to ride with them.” He said it reluctantly—almost in the nature of a warning.

Squint snarled. “To hell with what you used to do! Give me the gun!”

“What will the folks in town say when I don't come back?” Pop asked as he extended the gun, butt first.

Squint's left hand came up for it. He grinned evilly. “I'll tell 'em we was jumped by a couple of road-agents. I got away—but you didn't.”

Pop's extended hand moved almost imperceptibly. The Colt spun on its trigger guard, around his bony old finger, until the butt was snugly in his palm. As it roared, Squint jerked backwards and his gun threw lead at the sky.

“I reckon if you never saw Henry Plummer, you never heard of the Road-Agent's Spin,” Pop said gently. . . . But Squint was past answering.

Pop got up and went over to his horse and took a poke of gold dust from the bottom of the coffee sack.

In town, Pop stopped at the Spread Eagle saloon, but that was after he had gotten his dust changed to greenbacks and sent five thousand dollars to Johnny Trent.

He stood at the bar with a shot of whiskey in his hand to take some of the chill from his bones.

“We was jumped by a couple of road agents,” he explained. “I got away—but Squint didn't.”

He downed his drink, headed for the door. Word had just come in that the Bar X needed a cook. Pop had worked there before. They had a good, warm bunkhouse. Just the place for a man with age in his joints, to hole up for the winter.



MAIL-ORDER MASSACRE

The street came alive with roaring guns!



**By
Steve
Herrington**

Risking a tyrant's shoot-on-sight threat to sodbusters, Bud Keddie entered Redrock in broad daylight—to pickup a girl's wedding dress.

REDROCK lay bright and alive in fresh slant of the morning sun. Bud Keddie looked at it with a queer admixture of approval and contempt. The first was for the town, itself

—solid, honest sandstone buildings, set in even pattern about the intersection of two clean, unrutted streets. The second was for the men already beginning to stir here and there along the intersecting streets. There were two kinds of these; a kind who were whipped and a kind who did the whipping. But Keddie had no respect for either.

Smithson wasn't in the livery. Bud rode in, stalled his horse, and dipped a bucket of feed from the grain sacks inside

the doorway. This done, he came out again into the sun and started unhurriedly up the street. As he passed the fragrant, flower-laden garden in front of Judge Merriweather's house, he saw the old housekeeper stare incredulously at him from a side porch, then duck back into her kitchen.

A moment later an upstairs blind raised and the judge's face appeared, crowned with a sleep-tangled mop of white hair. There was incredulosity and a kind of quick fear in his eyes. Bud Keddie noted it with a dry, humorless smile.

As Bud stepped up onto the higher level of the board walk in front of the Emporium, big-bellied Tod Thornbury was racking up the stand of brooms which always flanked his front door when the Emporium was open. Thornbury shot a quick glance at Bud, then glanced up at the morning sun.

"You drunk, Keddie?" he snapped.

Bud shook his head.

"No, I'm not, Tod," he answered quietly.

"Better if you was!" the storeman growled. "Why the devil can't you 'busters' stay in the hills? Any sense you draggin' your quarrel with Medford down onto our streets? We got women and kids—and we don't like flyin' lead!"

Bud stopped for a moment, shooting a hard glance at the man above him. "Flyin' lead?" he asked softly. "Redrock should have thought of what it didn't like before it let Cass Medford take it over!"

Thornbury took a step forward. "The rest of your tribe's showing sense. When Medford ordered 'em to stay in the hills and out of his way, they done it. But you—here you are walking right down the middle of Redrock's street! What is it, Keddie—aiming to make trouble?"

"I've got a little business in Redrock, Tod, that's all," Bud answered levelly.

"With Medford?" Thornbury prodded.

"My business has always been my own, Tod. I'll keep it that way."

The storeman flushed angrily and stepped back into the Emporium.

Bud moved on down the street, turned at the intersection, and moved down to a building flying a flag from a short pole

next to the stage office. Inside, he stopped before the bank of postal boxes and unhurriedly worked the combinations on three of the small ones in the top row. It was an idle gesture, but when a man was in town, he looked to his neighbor's mail as well as his own.

There were two pieces of mail in his own box. One was a packet of trial seeds from a big seed house in Chicago. It was addressed to his dad. He left it in the box. There would be no time for planting experimental seed in the hills—not while the Eggshell was trying to expand. Cass Medford was seeing to that. Just as he'd seen the fightingest of the homesteaders in the hills would get no more mail. Seeing his dad's name on the packet, a tightness ran through Bud. Some day he'd find the man who had sent a rifle slug crashing into Ben Keddie's broad back. When he did—but that was another errand, marked down for another day.

He took out the other little package. It was addressed to his sister, Lois, and bore the return address of the jewelry firm in Albuquerque for whom she made silver and turquoise jewelry in the long nights when winter was down tight on the hills and the hours were long in the homestead cabin. Lois was the equal of the best Navajo smiths and the jewelry firm was always excited about her work. This packet was likely a present of some sort for her—a kind of bonus, Bud guessed.

When he opened Tommy Mansfield's box and found a similar packet from the same Albuquerque firm, he was certain of it. He grinned a little. Hell might howl at night in the foothills. Men might die, good and bad, but life went on among the 'busters. It was their tradition.

The third box, belonging to the Kilgalens, was empty. He dropped the two packets from Albuquerque into his pocket, snapped the three postal boxes shut, and crossed to the belly-high mailing desk against the wall. He was aware that old Uncle Billy Combs was watching him through the wicket. He flung a question over his shoulder at the grizzled postmaster:

"Package come in for Lois on last week's stage?"

Billy shook his head. Bud picked up a

well-thumbed mail-order catalogue from the mailing desk, opened it to the sheet showing postal rates, and carried it across to Billy's wicket.

"Rates still the same on packages out from the East?"

Billy looked at the schedule and nodded. Bud reached into his pocket and brought up a handful of coins, counting them with swift care.

"Be a package in for Lois today, then, I reckon. Wanted to be sure I had enough cash to cover postage and c.o.d. on it before I bought me breakfast. See you later, Billy."

"I'd not take a bet on that, Bud," the postmaster said warningly. "Ain't a package anybody could get out of the East that'd be worth the lead bullet Cass Medford'll deliver you when he sees you! Or have you forgot he swore he'd kill every homesteader he found on Redrock's streets!"



"I'M NOT forgetting anything, Billy," Bud answered quietly. "But this is an important package. I'll take a chance Medford won't come in from the Eggshell today."

Combs scrubbed a hand at his beard. "Well, somebody ought to tell you," he said half apologetically. "And maybe the livers are too weak up the street to do it. Medford's expectin' a couple more new hands for his spread in on today's stage. Sure'n the devil, he'll be in to meet 'em!"

"See you at stage time," Bud said, and stepped out again onto the street.

A pair of horse-faced Eggshell riders were idling on the walk in front of the Golden Horn when Bud Keddie rounded the corner back onto Redrock's main street. They affected no notice of him as he moved along, and in this, he read proof of Billy Combs' promise that their boss would be in town by stage time.

Bud Keddie was long and solidly built and his frosty eyes betrayed a steel at odds with the usual meekness of hill men. On orders to crowd the 'busters to the last notch, the two Eggshell men would have crossed the street and made the play against him for which they drew their

pay if he had been any one of his neighbors. But since he was young Keddie and still ringy over the bushwhacking of his old man, he was game for their boss alone. They let him pass.

There was a humor in this which brought a sardonic grin to the corners of Bud's mouth. But he passed on without a break in his stride. Bucking the hireling ramrod of the Eggshell Syndicate was a job for a man cut to a bigger pattern than even Bud Keddie. Cass Medford was too fast for a farmer. Let Redrock get its belly full of Medford's iron-handing and bring in a gun to match Medford's.

He had hoped that he could slide into Redrock, do his errand, and slide-out again with no more than a brush with Eggshell riders. The growing indications that Medford, himself, would shortly be in town, crimped those plans a little. Medford had made his boast about killing any hill man he found in town. He'd stick by it, and he'd have enough men to be certain he could carry it off. It was growing sharply apparent that he couldn't pick up that package, after all. Yet it had to go back into the hills with him.

His drifting eyes touched a sign up ahead. The Peking Cafe! He grinned a little. Lee, the owner of the Peking was Oriental. Bud had heard it said often enough, not only of Lee, but of his countrymen scattered across the grasslands, that no man could ever claim a friend behind the inscrutable mask of the Chinese. But Bud had not found this so. A difference of skin-pigment, hair, and eyes, made no difference that he could find. A man was a friend or friendless, according to his nature. And Lee was the salt of the earth.

The owner of the Peking looked curiously at Bud when he told him what he wanted.

"For a fact, Bud Keddie, you coming to town only to getting package for Missy Lois? No wanting make trouble, no bullets flying down the street?"

Bud nodded. "The way I look at it, Lee," he said grimly, "bucking Cass Medford's as much Redrock's fight as it is ours out there on the land his outfit wants. Let Redrock do its part and we'll do ours. Till then, we'll sit as tight as Judge

Merriweather and Tod Thornbull and the rest of 'em!"

Lee nodded sagely. "Is true," he agreed. "Your horse is at Smithson's stable? Good. Go sitting there where don't be seen from street. Boss Medford always leave his horse in front of Golden Horn. Don't go to livery. Comes stage, Lee go to Billy Combs and get package. Bring package to livery. Then you riding like hell for the hills. Is good, eh?"

Bud eagerly shelled out the silver in his pocket, counting out enough to cover the c.o.d. on the package. The rest he pushed across at Lee for his breakfast. While he ate, the two Eggshell riders he had spotted earlier passed idly down in front of Lee's, looking in to make sure he was still there. Half an hour before stage time, he slid out Lee's back door and drifted up through the lots to Smithson's. The livery man was in his cubby. When he saw Bud he came hastily out.

"Thought you'd never get back to get this horse out of here, Keddie!" he said angrily. "Medford don't give me none of his trade, and that's bad enough! Think I want him hearin' that I been shovin' oats to a damn 'buster!"

"Suck in your chin, Smitty," Bud cautioned. "My pay's as good as any and a sight better'n some! Just hold yourself in and you won't get hurt none. I'm waiting for some mail off the stage. Quick as it gets in, I'm riding. Till then, you'll just have to do with me."

Smithson's eyes brightened. "Then you didn't come in to buck Medford?"

Bud shook his head. "Think I'm the only crazy man in the county?" he rapped back. "Why should I do what nobody else will?"

"The way I feel," Smithson agreed. Suddenly he jerked his head up. "But I wish I didn't! This can't go on!"

"It can till there's some fight shows in Redrock!"

"Or in the hills," Smithson added softly. "My old man died of pneumonia. If it had been lead poisoning, I don't know how I'd feel—"

BUD let the liveryman's needling pass. But its barb stung long afterward. They sat in silence for a long time. Finally Smithson rose and

went back into his cubby. A little later a party of horsemen powdered into the street crossing in mid-town and swung down at the rack before the Golden Horn. Bud recognized Cass Medford's tall, arrogant figure in the vanguard of the riders and he automatically counted the party with the Eggshell foreman. Five; add two already in town; add another pair expected on the stage; add Medford, himself. Ten men. He whistled very softly to himself.

Medford would shortly get a report from his two who had passed up the street that a hill man was in town. The man might run a comb through Redrock for his quarry. Or he might just sit in the Golden Horn, attending to the business which had brought him into town, waiting for the hill man to make the first move. Either way, the odds were bad. He sat in the darkness of the livery's doorway and sucked steadily at his smoke as he thought.

He didn't hear the man who came into Smithson's through the door to the corral. He wasn't aware of the man until he squatted beside him. Then he jerked his head around. Tommy Mansfield scowled down the street and whistled, too, counting the horses at the Golden Horn's rack.

"Ten, eh," he said softly. "Looks like Bud Keddie's bit off more than he can chew!"

Tommy was a little younger than Bud, and he had come across the ridges so often the past two years to see Lois, that he was more of a brother than a neighbor.

"What the devil you doing here?" Bud demanded.

Tommy grinned at him. "Rode by your place. Lois told me you'd sneaked into town. Figgered you'd be at Smitty's if you weren't already on a slab at Doc Marple's. Think I'd miss a roundup like this?"

It was evident to Bud that his sister's fiancé thought he had come to Redrock to settle the valley's quarrel with the Eggshell.

"You're going to, Kid," he said sharply. "When I commit suicide, it won't be bucking hired guns nobody else'll tangle. I'm waiting for the stage. Lee's

going to meet it and bring me up a package Lois has coming. And I'm taking it back to the hills. That's all."

Tommy didn't lift his eyes from the street. "My mistake, Bud," he said quietly. "But you can't blame a man for putting his going-to-be brother-in-law in boots that're a little too big, can you? A kid'll do that, you know."

He chuckled, then went on in a grimmer voice. "You won't be waiting long, anyhow. The stage's in. I slid into town under cover of its dust. And here comes Lee—but I don't see any package!"

Keddie stabbed his eyes down the street. The Chinese had rounded the corner from the postoffice and stage station and was moving up the walk. But his hands were empty. A dozen yards behind him, Cass Medford and two range garbed strangers were headed up toward the Golden Horn. Each of the strangers was carrying a war bag. And Medford had a large brown paper package under his arm.

Lee turned into the front of his Peking Cafe. As he turned Bud saw the Chinese was walking with a peculiar springiness in contrast to his usual shuffle. Lee seemed to walk right through the Peking without pause. But he came out the back door lugging a long canvas parcel. He disappeared into the weeds and brush littering the lot behind his cafe. Minutes later he came around the corner of Smithson's livery and slid quickly inside. Bud stared at his face and felt a sudden, chilling shock.

Lee had been hit across the mouth. His lips were puffed and bleeding. Red streamed from his nose and stained the front of his white, sleeveless shirt. But it was neither the blood nor the ruin of his mouth which shook Keddie. It was the cold, implacable light in his eyes.

"Billy Combs giving across package for Missy Lois. Lee paying for same and start for door when bumping into Boss Medford and dropping package. Boss picking up same and see name on front. Says him keeping this. Lee try to take same back. Get bust on mouth and kick out the door. Boss say telling Bud Keddie him come for package himself or him get out of town. No other way!"

Smithson came out of his cubby and

looked at Lee, listening carefully to the Chinese. Tommy Mansfield squatted by the doorway, slanting a probing look up at the brother of the girl he planned to marry. Smithson swung his gaze away from Lee after a moment, fastening it on Keddie. And the Chinese stared fixedly at Bud.

The triple impact of those steady glances built up a pressure in Bud Keddie. He knew what each of them was thinking. He tried to find words and couldn't. He was grateful when Tommy Mansfield spoke after a long moment.

"If we wait they'll get a few shots under their belts and come hunting us. We can slide out through the corral the way I came. We ought to make it!"

Bud Keddie shook himself. "Listen, Kid," he snapped. "I came to town on an errand. Sis won't marry you and nothing else'll seem right to her till she's got that package. I told her I'd get it—and by hell, I will!"

Tommy rose from his heels, grinning. Lee thrust out the canvas parcel he had brought up from the cafe. A gun case.

"Coming one morning hunters with empty bellies and no money. Eat ten dollars grub, leave gun. You fix for Lee."

Bud slid the shotgun from the case, slid stock and barrel together, and tightened the break-down pin. Lee rummaged in a pocketbook of the case and brought out a pair of bird-shot shells. He dropped them into the double breech and snapped the weapon closed. Smithson stepped backwards into his cubby and came out belting on a gun hung in leather streaked with dust and webs of disuse. Tommy looked at Bud. Bud started walking.



ISSUING from the livery, the four of them fanned out abreast, Bud slightly in the lead, and they moved down the center of the street. As they passed Judge Merriweather's, the old man looked up in astonishment from his garden, then dashed into the house. Moments later Bud heard running feet behind them and wheeled. The judge puffed up to them, carrying the silver embossed hunting rifle which had hung on pegs above his fireplace since the year he had

been first elected to Redrock's bench.

"In the absence of the sheriff—" the old man began—"to make it legal—" he ran out of breath and said no more.

There was no need for it. All of them knew that the first move made by Medford when he took over management of the Eggshell was to tie Redrock's sheriff inextricably into his plan to clean the hills for expansion of the ranch and to thereafter keep the brow-beaten officer at one task and another at the far end of the county. In bitter talk with his neighbors in the ridges, Bud Keddie, like his father before him, had scornfully named Judge Merriweather a coward and a disgrace to his bench. He was neither.

As they passed the Emporium, Tod Thornsbury began to swear at them from his porch. Tod was a huge man, too weighted with flesh to even attempt carrying a gun. But when his tirade was through, he waddled down his steps and into the street to follow after them, still in his huge apron.

When Tod joined them, the front door of the Golden Horn shoved open, a hundred yards away, and Medford came out. He was carrying the paper bundle he had carried earlier. But it was in his left hand and swung back out of the way. He was flanked on either side by the quick-iron hands his syndicate money had brought north. And he moved easily among them, spreading them wide as they reached the middle of the street. He stood in their center, waiting confidently.

Bud shot a quick glance at Merriweather and Smithson. The old judge's eyes were unnaturally bright and his mouth hung slack as though in the effort of concentrating on the lethal line of men before him, his mind had neglected those muscles. The livery man was pallid and his eyes were shuttling uneasy. Keddie understood Medford's play.

However much the man was jolted by this sudden turning of the dogs he had kicked around, he was still counting on those kicks to tell. He was counting on the fear of peaceful men for violence. He was banking that when Redrock's citizens actually were faced with his row of deadly guns, they'd cave, leaving the two homesteaders alone and fair marks in the middle of the street. It was good logic

and Keddie recognized it as such. He had a moment's regret that he had let the townsmen join him. They were good men, but not equal to something like this; he would have saved them the humiliation of backing down, now.

But he had misjudged Redrock as completely as Medford had. Instead of stopping and driving suddenly off for cover, the party at Bud's back scattered a little more widely. And from the throat of the one unarmed man among them, Tod Thornsbury's booming voice rolled a challenge:

"Shove 'em high or buy your medicine, you mangy coyotes!"

For a moment the Eggshell crew was motionless. The range was closing, now, and Bud could see the realization run over the faces of them all that they had made a bad play—that they were caught in the open with a showdown at gun-point on nearly equal odds. Keddie felt a stab of wry humor that even he was counting Merriweather and Smithson and Lee as the equal of a gun-hung Texan in measuring those odds. Then the Eggshell broke.

It was a swift thing and beautiful as the strike of an angry snake is beautiful. Ten men—men whose lives were keyed to measuring odds and the moment to strike—moved together. Ten guns started from leather. But something spoiled it. Lee had been carrying his shotgun awkwardly down the whole course of the street, its muzzle thrust truculently out in front of him and the breech braced across his hip. He must have figured out on the way down just how to trigger the weapon and his finger must have been placed, waiting. For with the first whip of movement through the Eggshell crew, the gun smashed a double concussion against the fronts of Redrock's buildings. A tearing, smoking blizzard of birdshot swept down the street.

Men cried out. One fell to the ground, clawing at his eyes. Others jerked unwillingly against the leaden needling which swept them. And their guns cleared. But the delay had been enough for Bud Keddie to free his own weapon. He fired twice methodically at a man behind whom Cass Medford had ducked. The man went down. At his elbow, Bud heard Tommy Mansfield's gun string out the rolling

staccato shots of a boy who has worked long with his iron and uses it joyfully. New holes opened in the Eggshell ranks.

Medford was backing up. He flung a shot and fire gouged at Keddie's hip. He swung his gun level and answered the Eggshell foreman's challenge. He saw his slug hit, but Medford fired again. The bullet breathed past Bud's neck. He took a step and his wounded leg buckled. On his knee, he raised his gun again. Judge Merriweather's rifle was bellowing and Lee was frantically trying to jam another pair of charges into his shotgun. The Eggshell crew was a shambles, only two men left standing with their boss. But they fought on with the reasonless savagery of men hired to kill.

Judge Merriweather yelped and began to swear with the dignity of an expert. Medford's lean, tigerish face crossed Bud's sights. He dropped his hammer just as another slug hit him, spinning his hat from his head and bowling him flat. He tried to sit up again, but couldn't. A red haze overlay Redrock's street. In its center he saw Cass Medford drop a paper package, take a pair of steps and drop to the ground with a solidness which sent eddies of dust up about him.

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BUD KEDDIE opened his eyes. For a moment he didn't know where he was. Then he saw he was inside the Golden Horn, and its strangeness didn't puzzle him. This was the first time a hill man had been inside its doors since Cass Medford had made it his headquarters in Redrock. Doc Marple was sticking a big plaster on the side of Tod Thornbury's face. He moved and felt competent bandaging on his own thigh. There was the pull of tape near the crown of his head, also. Smithson and Judge Merriweather and Uncle Billy Combs were gathered around a deal table. The three of them were in a heated argument while Tommy Mansfield stood a little to one side, grinning. Smitty and Tommy seemed untouched. The judge, in spite of the blood trickling from the fingers of one hand, was wrestling frantically with Uncle Billy over a large, paper-wrapped parcel. As Bud sat up, Uncle

Bill tore it away from the judge.

"Damme, I don't give a hang if it is against Postal Regulations! I missed the fun out front and I'm going to see what kind of stuff that mail-order outfit's selling that'll make a hill-man shoot iron into a sick town's liver and see ten men dead to make sure his sister gets what she's ordered!"

The package came apart in Uncle Billy's hands. He stared for a moment, then reverently lifted out the gossamer, lace-fringed folds of the wedding gown Lois Keddie had picked from the catalogue months before. Uncle Billy slowly lowered the gown back into its box. His eyes leaped to Tommy Mansfield's face. Then they swung on to Bud.

"Reckon your sister's goin' to be sore about me bustin' into this box?"

Bud shook his head. "Just so she gets that dress. The way things have been in the hills, it won't be much of a wedding. That dress amounted to a lot to her."

Judge Merriweather had crossed to the window and was looking out onto the street where the remains of the Eggshell army still lay. He wheeled.

"It must have meant a lot, son!" he said gently. "Now, who says it ain't going to be much of a wedding? Why, hell, I'll order me a new suit out from Albuquerque, just to read off the vows in! And Tod and, Lee and Billy and me—"

He broke off as his fellow townsmen gathered around him. In moments they were deep in the plans of Redrock's most elaborate wedding. Bud caught Tommy Mansfield's eye.

"Sis'll be worried. You better skin out to her."

Tommy nodded, his eyes bright with the scraps of planning he could overhear from the huddling townsmen.

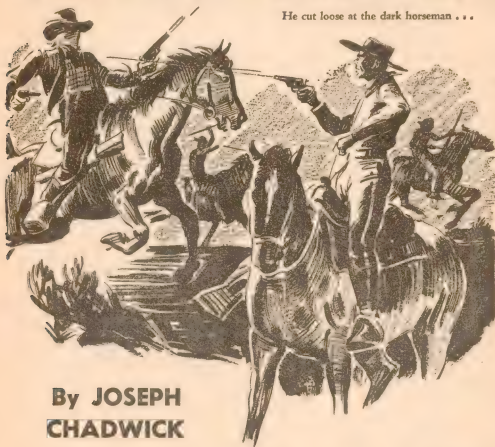
"Shall I tell her what they're up to?"

Bud shook his head. His sister was born to the hills. She would know what had happened without needing the details lying out in the bloody dust. To 'busters there is no greater happiness than peace. Nothing Redrock could do beyond what its fighting men had already done could bring her greater pleasure.

"Just tell her I got her package," he said.

Brand of the Yellow Stripe

He cut loose at the dark horseman . . .



By **JOSEPH
CHADWICK**

Cashiered out of the Army for cowardice, Lieutenant Jim Ransome makes a last desperate play to take the yellow stripe off his back and put it on his trousers.

JIM RANSOME mounted with the youngster in his arms and headed west across the desert, leaving the charred and still smoking remains of the freight wagons there in the gully. By sundown, with thirty miles behind him, he was in town and the grizzled frontier doctor was examining the button with troubled eyes, asking, "What happened?" "Apache raid."

Jim Ransome spoke stonily. He stood in the doorway to the medico's crude surgery, leaning wearily against the door-jamb with a quirly smoke hanging limp from his lips. Trail dust was yellow on his

clothes. Gaunt-faced and hollow of eye, he looked like a saddle bum. Only the blue pants, with the yellow stripe running down each leg from belt to boot-top showed that he once had been a soldier—a lieutenant of cavalry.

"You in it?"

"I rode by, too late."

"Then the boy's not your son?"

"No kin at all," Jim Ransome said.

He looked at the youngster lying on the table. A husky, tow-headed button. The medico was smearing ointment on the cruelly burned body, and the boy was whimpering. The head injury, caused

perhaps when the youngster was thrown from one of the freight wagons, had been dressed and bandaged during unconsciousness. The whimpering sounds twisted at Jim Ransome's heart. Jim saw the medico looking at him curiously, distrustfully, and he knew the old man suspected him of being a deserter. His gaunt face hardened.

"Look here," Doc Marvin said.

He moved his hand before the boy's eyes, very close, and he took a small mirror and flashed the oil lamp's glow against their surfaces. The eyes showed no reaction.

"Darkness," the medico muttered. He faced Jim Ransome squarely. "There's nothing I can do. An operation is necessary—soon. It will take a specialist, a skilled surgeon, and there's none here in Arizona Territory. The only hope is to send him East."

"How far East?"

"All the way. To Baltimore."

"What'll it cost for this fancy surgeon?"

Doc Marvin thought a minute, then said, "You'll need maybe five thousand dollars, all told." Then added, seeing the frown on Jim's gaunt face: "But I reckon you ain't got that much. And since the kid is no kin of yours—"

"I'm lookin' out for him," Jim said. "But supposin' I ain't got the money, and he don't get East—what then?"

"Darkness," the medico looked at the floor. "For as long as he lives. And a youngster of four lives a mighty long time."

Jim had to get out of there. His heart kept aching for the kid. He left him in the doctor's care and went out onto the street. The yellow glow of light showing above and below the batwing doors of a saloon drew him like a magnet. He needed a drink to wash away the memory of the boy's suffering. But when he stood at the bar letting whiskey sear his throat he found that it didn't help. He kept thinking how he'd come upon that scene of horror there in that desert gully. . . .

He'd seen the vultures wheeling overhead first. Then his horse grew jumpy. He began to sense the presence of death. He topped a rise and saw the last thin smoke. The four freight wagons were burned skeletons. The mules were dead in

their traces, having been wantonly shot. There were six lifeless bodies, and two inert but still breathing—a man cradling a boy in his arms. The man was gasping out his life, a bullet through his lungs, and his eyes lifting like a beggar's to Jim Ransome were glazed. He tried to speak but had a fit of coughing as Jim got down and knelt by him.

"Stranger, the Lord must've sent you," the dying man finally got out. "My son here, my Ben-ji, has got to looked after."

"I'll look out for him, mister."

"You swear?"

"My word, friend. Take it easy."

Relief was in the dying eyes; they closed, and the man's breathing rattled. He had but one other spoken word: "It was Injuns—but they was led by that damn renegade. His skin is white, but his heart—black!" He lay back and his arms fell away from the unconscious body of his son.

Jim Ransome could still see it all, and even whiskey couldn't wash the picture away. He kept thinking of the boy Ben-ji, who had a lifetime of darkness ahead of him unless he, Jim Ransome, somehow found five thousand dollars. He had two ten-dollar gold pieces in his jeans.

The saloon was crowded, jam-packed; painted women mixed with whiskey-consuming cowhands and miners, and there was a scattering of mule-skinner and desert rats and some hard-looking cases who might have been anything at all. There was a lot of talk running through the tobacco-smoke haze of the big room. Jim Ransome caught snatches of it: the freight wagon raid had been discovered, and there had been a shipment of high grade—gold dust and nuggets—aboard out of the wagons. Apaches, men said and cursed. Then, whispered, was the name "The Renegade."

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A MAN at a poker table said loudly, in a quiet moment: "Men, the Cargo Express Company will pay five thousand dollars in gold for information leading to the arrest or death of this lobo called the Renegade."

Jim Ransome put his back to the bar and looked at the man. He was a short,

pudgy-faced man in a gray store suit and a low-crowned black Stetson. He wore a diamond horseshoe for a tie pin and a big diamond ring on his left hand. He was cashing in a lot of poker chips. The crowd was looking at him, and a lanky cowboy said, "You mean that, Mr. Larue?"

Mr. Larue held up his winnings: he was dropping gold pieces into a leather pouch. He grinned at the crowd. "I always mean what I say, gents," he replied. "The name Larue is good as gold." He stood up, and his eyes were steely as he looked from face to face. "There's five thousand dollars in this sack. Any hombre knowing who the Renegade is can step up and claim it—now."

Jim Ransome eyed the pouch and thought of the button Ben-ji, who was blind and would stay blind for the lack of that much money. Then the batwing doors swung open to admit a barrel-bodied man who sourly muttered:

"You'll keep your poke, Mr. Larue. Ain't a man here with enough gumption in his pants to claim it."

Mr. Larue eyed him. "What about you, Bardine?"

"Matter of ignorance with me, Mr. Larue," Bardine grunted, and came into the saloon. He moved with a lurching roll like a grizzly on its hind legs, and his black-jawed face was scarred as though another grizzly had clawed it. He was trailed by a shifty-eyed breed, and the two men bellied up to the bar. "Liquor up, gents," Bardine shouted. "It's on me."

There was a rush to the long bar, men standing three deep and reaching, and Turk Bardine bellowed harsh laughter. But all at once his laughter cut off, and he yelled, "Hold it!" He elbowed men aside and faced Jim Ransome.

"Hell, it's the Lootenant!" he bellowed. "Folks, meet the Lootenant. He's the hombre what was court martialled up at Fort Saba last spring. You recollect? The Lootenant was charged with cowardice. He was chasin' Apaches, and the Injuns got him cornered in the rock hills. He forgot what they taught him at West Point—and broke and run. His detail was just about wiped out." Bardine paused and spat, and then he went on with his taunting. "The Army busted him out, because he wore his yellow stripes up his

back instead of on his breeches. Haw-haw!"

Jim Ransome had been haunted by all this; but now for the first time he was facing his disgrace. It was as Turk Bardine said; he had given a wrong order and his detail had been almost wiped out. He had known fear, but only because the military tactics he had learned at West Point didn't work against Apaches. He was branded a coward, and he couldn't disprove the brand—not even to himself. But Turk Bardine's mocking face filled him with recklessness.

His fist crashed into Bardine's face, and the hard-case's head snapped back. Jim followed up with another punch, but Bardine's face eluded him. The hard-case jolted him with a knee to his groin; and the floor came up and hit Jim in the face.

Bardine kicked him in the ribs, rolling him over; he kept rolling until he was free of the man's lashing boot, got to his feet and plunged in again, slugging at the man's thick stomach, and Bardine grunted under the blows. It was his weak spot, and he was like a flabby bellows as Jim kept hitting him; the wind went out of him, and then he went down.

Jim reeled, fighting the pain in his battered head. He stepped close and drove his fist into Bardine's face. The man's eyes glazed and he grunted and pitched down on his face. Behind Jim Ransome, Mr. Larue's cool voice breathed, "Watch it, my friend!" And Jim whirled, hand on his gun. Mr. Larue was holding a short-barreled derringer on Bardine's half-breed partner. The breed had half drawn to gun Jim down from behind.

Mr. Larue said, to Jim Ransome, "Mister, you have no friends here. You better blow out of town, pronto."

Outside, Jim walked a way and then ducked into a dark alleyway by a feed store. His heart was hammering crazily, and his legs were weak; he wasn't sure that he was knocked out by the beating Bardine had handed him. It might be fear. He had felt like this, all in, during that fight with the Apaches. He leaned against the feed store wall, gasping for breath, and then after a time he heard footsteps on the boardwalk out on the street. He shrank back, drawing his gun. A man halted before the alleyway's open-

ing and struck a match for a quirly. The glow splashed over Larue's face.

The gun was in Jim's hand, and in his mind was the picture of the kid Ben-ji. The kid was blind, and would stay blind unless he could be sent to that fancy surgeon back East. And in Mr. Larue's pocket was a five-thousand-dollar poke.

Masking his voice, he barked: "Larue, there's folks that need money more'n you. Take out your poke and toss it into the alleyway—pronto!"

Mr. Larue's match went out. He said, "Friend, you are making a mistake." But he took the gold-filled pouch from his pocket and tossed it into the darkness.

Jim ordered, "Now walk toward the hotel—and don't look back." A clammy sweat bathed him, and his gun was a great weight in his hand. But Mr. Larue obeyed, walking slowly toward the hotel along the opposite side of the street without looking back. Jim found the pouch. He backed down the alley with it, then turned and ran along the back of the buildings until he came to Doc Marvin's house. He went in without knocking, and the old medico was still with Ben-ji. Jim put the pouch on the roll-top desk.

"Here's the money," he said. "None of your business where it came from. I've got to hit the trail, so I'm leaving him in your care. When will you send him East?"

"On the stage tomorrow," Doc Marvin said. "The boy can't wait."

Jim backed out of the house, making for his horse. His nerves jumping, he listened. There was a rumpus on the street down by the saloon. A crowd was surging toward the sheriff's office. Jim stepped into the saddle and left town at a lope. The desert's darkness closed quickly about him.



JIM holed up in the badlands at sun-up. He kept his eyes open for Indian signs, but mostly he was jumpy about the posse that was sure to be on his trail. He didn't mean to let a posse catch up with him; he planned to leave the Territory, make a fresh start some place—maybe on a horse ranch, where an ex-cavalry-

man could hold down a job. And some day he'd have enough money saved to pay back Mr. Larue. He dozed off.

Nightfall, he came from hiding and rode out of the rock hills. There were no signs of a posse, and he began to feel safe, but coming onto flatter country he saw a band of Indians. There were a dozen braves in the bunch, and they were heading due south. Jim watched them from a handy pile of rock spires and boulders. The Apaches were in no hurry, but their direction was straight as an arrow toward the stage trail. Fear tightened like a knot in Jim Ransome's heart until they rode out of his sight. He remembered that fight he had had with Apaches; the memory was a black stain across his peace of mind.

He rode on for a couple of miles, then he began to think about the kid. He couldn't be sure Doc Marvin would do as he promised; instead of putting Ben-ji on the stage, the medico might ask some questions and, on learning the truth, return the five thousand dollar poke to Mr. Larue. Jim turned his horse south toward the stage trail. He'd have a look-see at that stage, to be sure. . . .

The country lifted a little toward the south, and from a stand of jagged rock Jim could look down on the road. He knew the stage left town at five o'clock and reached the Sarbo Creek station about eight, and he figured that he shouldn't have long to wait until the six-team Concord came rolling into sight.

Far off, suddenly, sounded the pounding of hoofs and the rattle and creaking of racing wheels. The stage was coming, at a breakneck pace. Jim straightened in the saddle; he figured on riding down and hailing the stage, but he would have to watch out that the gun-guard didn't throw lead at him for a road agent.

There was a movement below. Riders emerged from the rocks. Jim saw a dozen or more dark bodies, and the realization of what was to happen jolted him like a blow. The Apache band he had seen back-trail was about to raid the stage. Jim sat on his horse, frozen by a clammy fear.

The stage rolled into sight. The Apaches made a yelling, shooting rush. The gun-guard atop the stage yelped and threw up his arms and toppled off at the first crash

of fire. But the driver kept his horses running and the Apaches gave chase. Only one gun answered from the Concord; a man within the stage was firing a six-gun.

The Apaches closed in, firing their Sharps carbines at the horses. Their yells were blood-curdling, and Jim Ransome knew how it would end. The stage was doomed. And the button, the blind Ben-ji, was on that stage!

Jim felt like a man coming out of a trance. He raked with his spurs and pulled his cavalry carbine from the saddle boot. He began triggering out loads when he hit the stage road. By now the stage was stopped, its horses dead in the traces, and the Apaches were riding about it in a circle firing into the coach. The one six-gun kept answering their fire.

Jim came up at a rush, lifting himself in his stirrups and firing at the darting naked bodies. One went down, then another, then the remainder of the band swung about to center their blast of fire on him. A slug hit him a solid blow in the left shoulder; he reeled and lost his carbine.

The Apaches were pointblank now, their guns blazing, and Jim ripped out his six-gun and squeezed out two quick shots. Two raiders screamed and plunged from their ponies, and then Jim's horse had carried him through the horde. His left arm dangled, and he had to holster his gun and use his right hand to pull in by the stage. He jerked his horse about and drew his gun again. The raiders were coming back, guns blazing. Slugs cut into the coach behind Jim. Then Jim saw the Renegade.

The man loomed out of the darkness, a masked giant shouting curses and orders at his Apaches. He rode a black horse, and he was clad in black, but he made a deadly shadow. He was triggering out shots from twin six-guns.

Jim knocked a raider from the saddle, then turned his gun on the renegade white. He fired once and missed, and the Renegade came steadily on. Jim knew this was the end, but he knew too that he would take this lobo wolf with him. There was but one load left in his gun. A voice in his mind told him to aim low. He fired at

the Renegade's stomach. The bulky masked man kept coming, and one of his bullets seared along Jim's ribs like the touch of a branding iron. Jim flung his empty gun at the masked face. It struck with a dull thud, and the Renegade pitched from his saddle.

Jim reeled and, as an Apache pony collided with his horse, he toppled from the saddle. He hit hard and lay still.

The desert night was strangely quiet when Jim's mind cleared. He got unsteadily to his feet and clung to a wheel of the Concord. The raiders were gone, except for some lifeless bodies in the dust. Jim groped his way to the coach door and looked in. Doc Marvin was inside with the kid Ben-ji.

"Be with you in a minute, friend," he said, low-voiced. "I've just got Ben-ji back to sleep. He's a brave button, this Ben-ji. He didn't scare much."

Jim reached in and touched the boy's tow head. He whispered, "Good boy, Ben-ji—never be afraid." Then he turned and saw Mr. Larue. He dropped his hand, but his holster was empty. Mr. Larue had a six-gun in his hand.

Mr. Larue motioned with his gun. "Move back, friend," he ordered.

Jim went behind the stage. The Renegade's bulky body lay sprawled on its back. The stage driver, nursing a wounded thigh, sat on the ground staring. Mr. Larue said, "Friend, you got the Renegade. I reckon you should have the honor of unmasking him."

Jim Ransome reached down and jerked the mask away. Mr. Larue struck a match, and the glow splashed over the scarred dead face of Turk Bardine. The match went out, and Jim faced Mr. Larue.

"I guess there's another matter to be settled," he said.

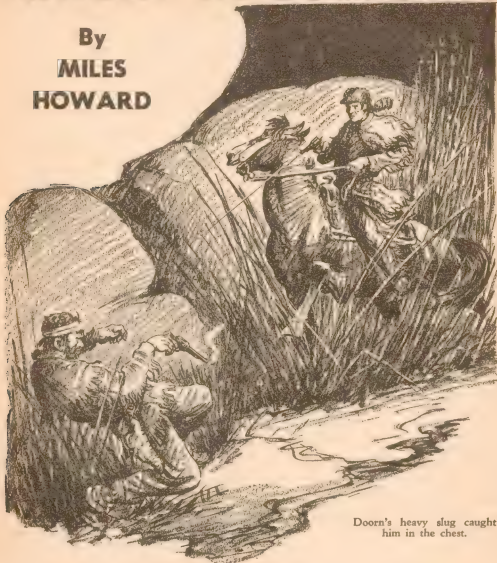
Mr. Larue nodded. "There was a reward," he said.

"I'm not collecting it."

"I figured that," Mr. Larue told him. "You collected it in advance, my friend. And you put it to good use." He holstered his six-gun and held out his hand. Jim Ransome grasped it; but his thoughts were on another matter. He was making the discovery that he had lost fear. He had stood his ground like a soldier.

KNIGHT IN BUCKSKIN

By
**MILES
HOWARD**



Doorn's heavy slug caught him in the chest.

Buckskin Scout Doorn Cateret knew that dogs were the night eyes and ears of an emigrant caravan. Yet Camp Commander Barclay Johnson had given the brutal order to slaughter every pet on the Oregon Trace!

THE sound of the first shot was like a sudden pinprick between Doorn Cateret's shoulder blades, and his reaction was instinctive. The buckskin fringe along the sleeves of his hunting shirt whispered as his brown hands tautened the reins along Bugle's neck, and turned the big bay cavalry horse he had purchased in Independence.

From the vantage point of this butte where he sat, Doorn Cateret looked back through the clear twilight to the wagon

train that was his responsibility. The shot had come from inside the circled Murphy wagons, and for the space of a minute, Doorn relaxed again. Probably some Oregon-bound emigrant had accidentally discharged his rifle.

Then his nerves were tightening again immediately for a boy dwarfed to doll-like proportions by the distance came ducking beneath the locked tongue and endgate of two of the tall prairie schooners. Through tall prairie grass the youngster started a futile run toward the butte a good mile distant.

Doorn Cateret heard the rifle inside that circle crack again, and he knew this second discharge was no accident. He loosened Bugle's reins, and dropped a word in the big animal's ear. Like a gull in flight, the horse broke over the rim of the butte.

He had ridden ahead that late afternoon to scan the yonder prairie for Indian sign and to scout the easiest route for the wagons to follow the next morning. Somewhere out there ahead lay Fort Laramie and beyond that South Pass where the mountain winds boomed freely. And somewhere beyond the Rockies the great Columbia rolled to the sea. The valley of the Willamette was there. Oregon!

The word was a stirring in a man's blood, a challenge, a call to conquest. It was like a spark struck from flint to fire the imagination of man, and start him on the long trail West in this year of 1842. West to Oregon and the Willamette, where there was black rich earth waiting the plow.

Some would live to see the Columbia roll, and some would leave their bones to mark the newly opened Trace. It was Doorn Cateret's job to see that as many reached that distant land beyond the shining Rockies as was humanly possible.

The shots he could not understand were still sounding with methodical regularity inside the wagon circle. He could hear them even above the rumble of Bugle's shod hooves on prairie sod, above the wild sing of the wind through the fur of his cap.

Out of eyes, only a shade browner than the deep bronze of his rawboned face, Doorn watched the boy struggle closer through grass that twined about his knees.

He had guessed the identity of the youngster from the butte. Now they were close enough together to make recognition certain.

Sammy Kane was the lad's name, and from the day the caravan had caught up and pulled out from Elm Grove twenty miles below Independence, young Sam had attached himself to Doorn Cateret with the persistence of a cockle-burr. That young man had liked the smoky smell of the scout's buckskins, and he had listened with wide eyes to the tales of trapping along the Yellowstone, and in the Rockies far away. He'd learned of Taos from Doorn Cateret, and of how mountain men risked their hair for a year so they could bring in a load of plew to squander in one wild week on Spanish brandy, and—

"If you add Mexican señoritas," Marita Kane had stopped that good tale in the making, "I'll take Sammy away from you and your stories, Mr. Cateret!" Marita was Sammy Kane's older sister, and a prettier lass had never set her foot to the Oregon Trace. Or so thought Doorn Cateret, but he was a smart enough man not to let her know it.

Train Captain Barclay Johnson had wooed her smiles with other blandishments, however, and there'd been times since they'd pulled away from Elm Grove when Doorn had doubted his own technique. But in his heart he had made up his mind to one thing. Where the Columbia rolled would rise a log cabin and in it would be Marita Kane and Doorn Cateret. He had seen what he wanted, and he was still young enough and stubborn enough to vow that he would have her, Captain Barclay Johnson be damned!

Sammy Kane was no more than a hundred feet away now, and Bugle narrowed that distance swiftly. The boy's voice came at the scout shrilly as he swooped low from his saddle and lifted the youngster to a seat in front of him.

"Doorn, Doorn," the lad's cry had agony in it, "Johnson's killing all our dogs! He claims a passing trapper told him the Cheyenne are on the warpath, an' that the dogs might bark at night and give us all away. Doorn, that Johnson hates our pets and he's goin' around shootin' them. I put Boxie in the wagon. I hid him under the bed, and came to find you.

Doorn, you won't let that Johnson kill Boxie, will you?"

"He's got his facts a little twisted, Sammy," Cateret told him soberly. "A good dog's ears are better than yours and mine. No, we won't let him kill Boxie."

They were at the chained circle of wagons now, and Bugle rose as Doorn's moccasined heels touched his silken flanks. The cavalry horse cleared the tilted wagon tongue by a nice margin.

A glance about was enough to show the scout knots of emigrants gathered in close conversation. Some were looking dully down at their pets, already slaughtered. Others had animals that were still alive close to their feet.

And like a man vengeance-sent, Captain Barclay Johnson strode from his last kill. One of his burly teamsters paced on either side of him. Short-guns filled their holsters, and each was charging a smoking rifle. They were close to another wagon now, and a shaggy terrier with black and white curly hair came leaping down from the tailgate to greet a man he'd often welcomed to their wagon when the evening chores were done, and courting time had come.

"Boxie!" Sammy Kane cried.

With the grimness of an executioner, Captain Johnson accepted a charged rifle from the hands of one of the teamsters.

Bugle swung, it seemed of his own accord, and Doorn Cateret felt a lifting sensation of pleasure. He had a good, blue-steel cap-and-ball Navy Colt at one hip, and a long, Green River blade at the other, but they were weapons he had no intention of using. Steel and lead should be saved for redskin blood!

"Johnson," he sent his call ringing ahead, and he saw the captain's head and arms lift, and that was what he had wanted. It was a dangerous thing to do, but he swept Bugle straight in front of the man, and his right hand plucked the weapon from the surprised hands of the captain.

The rush of his run carried Bugle past the trio, and then Doorn's hand on the reins spun him to a rearing halt. Sammy Kane almost fell from the saddle, but the scout's arm saved him.

Hush came to the camp. Silence that seemed to have no ending, and Doorn let it drag on. His brown eyes in the raw-

boned frame of his face studied Barclay Johnson, and the strength of their wills clashed like bright knives in the clear twilight.



JOHNSON was dark. Black hair curled below his wide, flat-crowned black hat. It roached in handsome fashion about the open-neck collar of his blue flannel shirt. It framed his ruddy, arrogant face.

His black eyes clashed with brown ones as hard, and his lips started to curl. Without changing expression, he put out his hand to accept the second charged rifle. Doorn swung the long weapon in his own right hand, and the hammer clicked to full cock. His face wore the calm of a man who has lived with the greatness of mountains and rivers.

"Shoot Boxie," he said simply, and the silence was such that his voice carried, "and I will shoot you."

The hand Barclay Johnson reached for the second rifle stopped.

The teamster had started to swing the weapon to cover the boy and scout. With something almost like sadness on his face, Doorn's left hand dipped toward his belt, and Green River steel that had skillfully taken the hide from many a beaver flashed in the evening light. Just as skillfully it whirled through air now with a force unexpected, and buried its bright point in the stock of the rifle. The weapon tore from the teamster's surprised hands.

"I could," Doorn Cateret told the man in his plain way, "have put that blade through your heart. But we need live men to reach Fort Laramie and South Pass. Not dead ones. We need live animals, too, and that includes our dogs. Redskins—" Doorn continued with a flicker of smile touching his lips—"have eyes. If they are so blind that they cannot spot these wagons, I am sure we have nothing to fear from them!"

Captain Johnson had brought his hands to his belt. Thumbs hooked inside its big, wide buckle, he stared coolly up at the scout, and Doorn had to admire the man's composure. None but himself and the boy as still as stone in front of him could see the tiny red flames of hatred that glowed

deep down in the man's dark angry eyes.

"I am the commander of this wagon train," Barclay Johnson spoke for the first time, "and after the conversation I had this afternoon while you were on advance patrol, I felt the advice Jim Crow Bodey gave me was good. If you had been with the caravan, Cateret, I would have consulted you first. As Head Scout and Commander of the Guard, part of the responsibility for our community safety is yours. If you feel the remaining dogs in our caravan should live, I will agree with your conclusions!"

He was saving himself with the grace of a man who had done so before, Doorn thought, and yet he knew that the show-down would come sometime before either of them saw the Willamette. He knew more, too, and the knowledge was like a cold chill settling in the pit of his stomach. It was on the tip of his tongue to inform Captain Johnson that Jim-Crow Bodey was a renegade. A squaw-man who had lived with the Cheyenne for the last half dozen years. A man, ugly rumor said, who was responsible for more scalps lost than any other on the plains. He had evidently come in behind the train, and put his poison into Johnson's ears; for a wagon train without dogs had lost a good share of its sharp eyes and ears.

Captain Johnson and his teamsters had turned and were moving solidly back toward their own wagons. Doorn felt a sigh run out of the boy in front of him, and its echo seemed to sweep the camp. He did not like the feeling here. A train divided against itself doubled their own hazards.

"Here comes Sis," young Sammy Kane squirmed, and Doorn lifted him free so that he could hop down to the ground. The boy gathered bright-eyed little Boxie into his arms, and he tried to make his voice big and scornful as he looked up at the scout. "She'll want to thank you for savin' Boxie, too," he said, "but women ain't got the same feelings as us men. Mebbe I can pay you back some day—"

Marita Kane was coming tall and slim with a grace to her walk that bulky skirts could not hide. But before she reached them Doorn had time to make his request.

"Sammy," he murmured, "you carry these rifles back to the captain's camp,

then nose around and find out if Jim-Crow Bodey is still here. Don't let on I want to know."

"That feller is gone," Sammy said promptly. "He caught up with us this afternoon, palavered for awhile with Johnson, then lit a chuck to the north. Say—" his young eyes were widening.

Doorn handed him down the rifle he'd taken from Johnson and gestured for him to pick up the other one. "Take 'em back, younk, and pin that mouth of your'n shut," the scout advised.

By the time Sammy had turned away, Marita Kane was at the withers of Cateret's big mount. Doorn tipped his head down to her, and natural courtesy made him lift his long-tailed cap from the brown of his hair.

The girl's eyes were blue as the prairie flowers that sometimes colored the Trace. Bright golden hair framed her oval face, and her lips were as red as though she had dyed them with scarlet paint. Her shoulders were wide and graceful, yet strong. She carried herself proudly, even at this end of a day's twenty miles hard travel. Her strength seemed to come from some inexhaustible well deep within her body.

Doorn thought of coming home and finding her waiting for him in the doorway of a cabin on the Columbia, and his heart swelled. Evidently he wasn't much of a hand at hiding his thoughts, for Doorn saw the girl suddenly blush, and the momentary confusion between them brought red into his own cheeks.

"I—I want to thank you for saving Boxie, Mr. Cateret," she said at last, a little primly. "And the other dogs. I know more of our people will want to do the same, so I thought you might like to have supper with us. Afterwards father might even get out his banjo and we could all sing awhile."

Doorn shook his head, shoulder-length hair brushing the collar of his tunic. He tried to smile to ease the sting of his refusal, but his lips felt like iron. "Etta," he shortened her name, "I'd like it a heap, but the guard is going to need me tonight, and I'd sure thank your dad if he'd keep his banjo in its case till we sight Fort Laramie."

Disappointment brought quick anger

into the girl's eyes. "You are too high-handed, Mr. Cateret. You are not camp-boss. I will speak to Mr. Johnson."

"Your privilege," Doorn told her gravely. He watched the girl leave him, and wished that he could have told her something about Jim-Crow Bodey.



THROUGH the dark hours of that night he was a patient shadow moving silently in a circle beyond the ring of guards posted outside the wagons. Only for a few hours before dawn did he manage to get some rest, bedded down on soft grass near Bugle. The knowledge that was his, he told himself, as sleep claimed his soul, was something he dared not pass on. Jim-Crow Bodey had come to this camp to scout the size of the train. And yet there was one thing about the squaw-man's visit that puzzled Cateret. If a Cheyenne war-party was actually in this neighborhood, he could not understand the renegade mentioning it.

Surprise was an Indian's best weapon. More than one plains party had lost their scalps before they could even get their wagons corraled. Bodey hadn't told that news just to give Captain Johnson an excuse to slaughter helpless pets that he hated. No, Jim-Crow Bodey had a more subtle motive for the visit he had made, and Doorn Cateret could not figure the answer.

He heard the sentinel's rifle signaling dawn, and it seemed to Doorn that he had not slept at all. He lay for a moment on one elbow, watching the wagons pour forth their emigrant occupants. Smoke soon began to lift in gray ribbons above the already travel-stained tilts of the schooners. Incoming guards from the graveyard watch joined night-herders already bringing in oxen, mules and horses from the cavy outside the wagon circle.

It was a morning sight that never failed to lift his spirits. The way ahead was long, and danger would mark all the length of it, but with luck, and perseverance, they'd live to see the Valley of the Willamette, and feel the free wind of Oregon.

Once again Doorn led the way with the caravan stretched in a mile-long line behind him. The undulating prairie fell

away behind them, slow league on league, as the hours sought their place in eternity, and gradually as the day wore on a vast shadowy barrier rose above the horizon. Doorn felt his heart lift at the sight. That barrier on the morrow would take its true shape. 'The Shining Mountains,' the plains tribes called them. The Rockies!

The sight should have brought joy to emigrants weary for the sight of even a tree, yet as he returned to the wagon circle at the end of the day Doorn sensed the fear and worry that seemed to have taken possession of men and women alike. Gloom. It would sap the energy of man quicker than the hardest work!

Leonine head swerving, he spotted the impressive shape of Captain Johnson beside the cook-fire the Kane family had already kindled. The shaggy Boxie was crouched back against a wagon wheel, bead-bright eyes never leaving Johnson. Marita and her mother were busy with pots and pans. The girl's cheeks were flushed, and her eyes lighted at sight of the approaching scout, but Doorn gave her only a brief nod.

"Howdy, Cateret." Across the fire Bert Kane broke off his talk with Captain Johnson, and hitched at the single suspender that held pants on his lathy body. He was a whiskery careless man, Doorn thought, who would break little sod along the Willamette if he could get out of it. The day might come when it would be his chore to provide for them all, unless Bert Kane could convince Marita that a man with four wagons was worth a dozen foot-loose scouts. Doorn had never been able to hide his feelings completely, and he could not keep the distaste from his eyes and voice as he looked from the shiftless emigrant to Barclay Johnson.

"Capt'n," Doorn asked in his slow, meager way, "what's got into this outfit?"

Johnson was clean-shaven as usual, his dark cheeks the hue of gunmetal. Concern that held an edge of mockery beneath the surface was in his voice when he answered. "Cateret, it's got me worried, too. Bert and I were just discussing the situation. Seems like that Injun scare we had yesterday was bad for the folks. Them as have mule-drawn wagons are getting anxious to push on ahead of

the slower ox-outfits. Some of their cattle are losing weight pretty fast, too. Others are going lame, and I've heard some talk today about selling wagons at Fort Laramie and pushing on with pack outfits."

Doorn heard the bad news, and his lips drew inward against his white teeth. "Capt'n," he said flatly, "it's your job to put a stop to that talk. We split and won't none of us see the Willamette. This outfit ain't a proper size, even now. I was hoping we might pick up some Oregon recruits at Fort Laramie, not lose what we've got!"



THE grumbling continued. It cut an hour off catching up time the next morning. It slowed the pace all the long day, and instead of twenty miles, Doorn figured they'd made a lucky ten. And that afternoon Cheyenne smokes bloomed on the hills on either side of the wide valley they were following. Doorn studied them in the twilight, and he did not like their look.

That night he set the guard early, and told each sentinel who possessed a dog to keep him close alongside. It was his custom to shave each evening, because he did not like the feel of stubble on his face, but tonight there was no time. A strip of jerky, and a handful of corn made supper, then he was up on Bugle, and out to scout the dark plain again, a shadow moving amongst shadows, with worry for a saddle-mate.

Someone in the wagon train was spreading grumbling talk, deliberately trying to breed dissension, and sap the courage of emigrants who needed all the fortitude they could muster.

"I've got to locate that cussed—" he was thinking the words out loud when the sharp, snarling bark of a dog from over by the close-herded cattle and mules cut his thoughts short. He recognized Boxie's imperious voice, then through the faint sheen starlight cast upon this plain he saw the lank, slatternly shape of Bert Kane rear into view from where he had been resting beside the bedded stock.

The emigrant's rifle spoke as Doorn lifted Bugle into a run, but one bullet was a pitiful defense against the dark, naked

shapes that rose like wraiths out of the tall grass.

Bugle thundered nearer, and Doorn jerked the cap-and-ball revolver from his holster. He threw a shot toward the raiders, hoping to distract their attention from Kane, but the distance was still too great for accurate shooting. Like swarming demons the Sioux were on the emigrant. Doorn caught a last sight of Bert Kane, and saw the man's one bid for glory in a life that had brought him little.

Rifle clubbed, he was making his last magnificent stand, and there was a ring of broken and dead bodies about him. Then one brave leaped in from the rear, and Doorn tried to tag the Sioux with lead, but again he missed. He saw the flash of the warrior's knife, and then Bert Kane was toppling forward like an old tree uprooted by storm winds.

A wedge of cattle and mules broke suddenly from the main herd, high Sioux yells, like the sharp barking of wolves, urging them on. Other guard rifles were speaking now, and Doorn saw a warrior throw his arms high over his head, and he heard the quavering, defiant death yell in the man's throat.

Belly brushing the grass in a low full run, Bugle tried to head the stampeding cattle. A Sioux, naked shoulders glistening, came up from the plain before him, and loosed an arrow. Doorn heard the savage whisper of it past his shoulder, then the Navy Colt was earning its keep. Lead from its barrel blasted the warrior into oblivion. But the diversion had been just enough. The cattle were gone, moving like a blur in the night. So were the Sioux, melting back into the grass from which they had risen. In this dark no man could search them out, and the one man who tried would be a fool for a steel-tipped arrow or a flung tomahawk would certainly be his reward.

The number of cattle and mules lost had been insignificant, Doorn thought as he swung Bugle back toward the knot of men gathered at the spot where Bert Kane had gone down. It had been nothing but a nuisance raid, his trained scout's mind was telling him, and yet it had been well planned with a deeper, more sinister motive. Jim-Crow Bodey had mapped this attack. Doorn Cateret knew it as plainly

as though the renegade was standing before him ready to admit his guilt. But why had the squaw-man contented himself with something so minor, when in the dawn, he might have gathered his war-party and launched a full-scale attack?

That was the question the scout asked himself as he drew up at the edge of the group about Kane and he could find no honest answer. Time, shrouded in the mystery of the future, might give it to him, and it might not.

Five Sioux, naked save for breechclouts and fringed leggings, lay in a semi-circle about the dead emigrant. Captain Barclay Johnson and a half dozen embarrassed wagoners were ringing the circle, for a sobbing shape in voluminous skirts was huddled down beside Bert Kane, holding his head and shoulders in her lap. It was Marita.

Sudden anger flamed through Doorn. "How'd she get here?" he demanded harshly.

Someone muttered an answer. "She was bringin' out a pot of hot coffee to help keep him awake—"

God alone had kept the girl from arriving minutes sooner, was the thankful thought that entered the scout's mind, as he found himself swinging down from Bugle's saddle. If she had been here when the Sioux attacked, they would have carried her off.

Without stopping to find a reason for his actions, Doorn brushed through the circle, and with his cap in hand, he knelt beside the girl, and put a gentle hand beneath her elbow.

"Marita," he spoke the words with soft eloquence, "I saw your dad die. It was a sight to make a man proud—and you should be, too. Some have got to go, so the rest of us can keep on living. Tears won't carry you to the Willamette, Etta, but a smile might go a long way toward doing it!"

The girl raised her wet face, and there was a shining light in her eyes. "Take me back to camp," she whispered huskily. "I'll be all right—"

They left six decent graves beside the Trace the next morning. One, they put a rude cross over to remind those who would still come this way to Oregon that an emigrant lay here, and that he had sold

his life at the high cost of five to one.

And the gloom deepened. Even the long awaited sight of Fort Laramie rising solidly at the foot of sparsely verdured hills did not serve to dispel the feeling of depression that seemed to grip the train.

Young Sammy Kane, riding forward to the scout's position in the lead, put it into words. "Dang me, Doorn, I can't figure it," he said man to man. "I'm just a-itchin' to see the inside of that there fort, but the folks back in the caravan don't seem to give a hoot. Everybody is so busy jawin' and snappin' at each other that they got no time to be glad about anything, seems like."

Cateret turned his sober glance on the youngster. Youth, he thought, could rally from the shock of death better than older people. Sammy was eager to get on, not remembering that his father was dead. The rest of the train should feel the same. One raid, and an emigrant left along the Trace was not enough to breed the dissension that was tearing this outfit apart.

"There's going to be a split here at the fort, son," he said slowly, "unless we can do something to make folks ready to pull in single harness again. You get back to the wagons, and keep your eyes and ears open. Try and mark out the ones who are keepin' the pot boiling."

The boy nodded, and his eyes were shining with pride at the chore given him as he swung his old mule toward the lumbering wagons. Doorn watched him go somberly. One youngster like that might be worth a dozen men when it came to cheering disheartened emigrants. Sammy Kane deserved to see the Columbia.

"And he'll get it," Doorn muttered.



ANOTHER rider came galloping from the long line of wagons. Astride a big black, Doorn recognized Barclay Johnson. The train captain drew up alongside the scout, and his bold eyes touched Doorn.

"I'm riding in to make arrangements for our stay, Cateret," he said briefly, "and to find out what price wagons and stock will bring in case some of the outfit wish to sell and continue on with only pack animals."

And then it came to Doorn with sudden shock that here was the man who had started that talk of splitting up. Johnson had four-mule-drawn outfits of his own, and he was willing to risk the safety of the whole party in order to gain the Willamette in time to take possession of the best lands. There might be even more behind the talk he had spread in the wagon train. But thinking so, Doorn kept his thoughts to himself.

"We'll camp along Elm Creek outside the walls," he said quietly.

Johnson nodded brusquely, and lifted the black toward the wide gates in the solid stockade of the fort.

Wind seemed to bring the dusk rushing swiftly down from South Pass. Ordinarily the caravan would have been circled before this, but with Elm Creek less than half a mile ahead, and a pleasant night in prospect within the safe mud and log walls of Fort Laramie, drivers were pressing their animals forward. And now behind him for the first time, Doorn heard the high excited cries of teamsters and the rough music of straining ox-chains. The sounds lifted his spirits momentarily, and made him certain that if all this talk of separating was halted the train would continue as a unit.

His brown fist clenched on the nub of his saddle, and involuntarily his eyes swung ahead toward the line of greenery marking Elm Creek. Johnson was almost to the ford now, black horse blending with the dark. Somehow the captain had to be shown the error of his reasoning. Unless he was deliberately set to wreck the caravan—

So thinking, Doorn stared after the captain, and as he watched the man approach the fringe of trees edging the creek, he saw a shadow detach itself from the willow and aspen. A man was beckoning furtively, and instinct as much as vision identified him for the scout.

The man waiting for Captain Johnson was Jim-Crow Bodey!

Doorn drew a ragged breath. He saw the twin shapes melt into the shadows beneath the trees, and the sudden red madness that gripped him was the same hue as the sunset clouds above the Rockies. He lifted Bugle into a run, with a single harsh word.

A man normally not reckless with his life, Doorn Cateret was reckless now. The future of all the emigrants in the train might depend on the truth he choked out of the pair in the bosquet of the creek ahead.

Lead came searching for him as he pushed Bugle toward the ford, and he barely heard Barclay Johnson's voice snarl, "You fool, Bodey. That scout's got eyes, and a head. Why didn't you keep out of sight?"

The Navy Colt was in his hand now, and the deep oily click as it came to full cock was completely satisfying. One man, or two, or three, might die here along Elm Creek. But others would live to hear the wild free wind boom high over the Willamette.

A branch struck savagely at Doorn's face as he smashed Bugle through the screening willow of the ford, but it was no more wicked than the lead snarling at him from one side.

He caught a glimpse of Jim-Crow Bodey down on one knee, long Colt steadied across his opposite arm. There was fear mirrored in the squaw-man's narrow, bearded face, and a man afraid could not aim a gun accurately.

Doorn caught him squarely in the breastbone with a heavy slug that knocked him backward, and cold words touched the scout's lips. "Scare folks into splitting the train, would you? Well, Bodey, think again. We're going to sell no wagons and stock here at starvation price, and let you and Johnson collect the difference!"

For that was the plan those two had evolved, he could see now. Bloody dollars at the expense of life was what they wanted, but they weren't going to get it.

Then a horseman came ripping from the shrouding greenery behind the squaw-man. Barclay Johnson had a Colt in each hand, and his black was rushing straight toward Bugle. In ancient days men with spears and shields had fought such battles, but buckskin was slight protection against lead.

Doorn felt the slash of a bullet across his ribs, and Johnson was speaking the truth in the words he hurled at the scout. "One of us has got to die!" he shouted the words, "and I won't have much trou-

ble convincin' folks you were in cahoots with Bodey—"

Closer the two big mounts rushed, and Doorn felt one leg go suddenly numb, and he knew he'd been hit again. But still he held his own fire, for all the red rage had gone out of his mind. He was cool now and calm, with the knowledge that one of them would never live to see the Columbia roll.

Thirty feet separated them now, and Johnson was still firing alternately from his twin weapons. Doorn lifted his own Colt, and took aim. He was slow and deliberate about it. The back of a running horse was no deck to fire from.

And as he settled his sights on his target, a four-legged demon from hell sprang from the brush siding this sandy strip where their duel was taking place. A shaggy terrier, and it leaped straight at the hocks of Johnson's mount. The black swerved, and Doorn knew that he had missed his shot. Deliberately then he swung Bugle and the two animals met in solid collision. Doorn felt himself thrown forward from his saddle, and he grappled the swaying shape of Johnson into the circle of one arm. Breath gushed from his lungs as their bodies struck hard sand, then he felt the man beneath him go slack and loose, like a sack from which the grain has been poured.

Pain from his bullet-riddled leg cascaded through Doorn as he struggled to his feet. It brought a mist before his eyes, and a kind of roaring into his ears. Through the roaring he heard the sharp growls of Boxie, and weaved around toward Jim-Crow Bodey. The renegade was dying, but like a scotched rattler he was still ready to kill, trying to reach the Colt that had fallen from his grasp. Boxie was crouched over the gun.

"If you want to go to hell with a chewed hand, keep reaching for that gun," Doorn said, and his tongue felt thick. "If you want to die clean, mebbe you'll tell me if the idea I got on you and Johnson is straight."

Gunshots echoing, had brought emigrants rushing ahead from the wagons, and men racing down from the fort. They were gathering at the bloody ford now, but Doorn had eyes only for the renegade.

"My guess," he said almost soothingly, "is that you and Johnson cooked up that dog-killin' and Indian raid jest to breed as much fear and grumbling in our outfit as possible. If Johnson could split the train here at the fort, you'd both collect double by bidding in wagons and stock for a tenth their worth, and then taking 'em over South Pass yourselves. It would have been a right nice scheme if it had worked. Am I right, Bodey?"

He was swaying on his feet, and a hand had come to steady his elbow, but he still had eyes only for the dying renegade. And slowly, at last, he saw Jim-Crow Bodey nod.

"You're p'intin' the stick, Cateret," the squaw-man said thickly. "We were aimin' to take over, and I was goin' along to Oregon, believe me or not, and start honest and fresh again—"

Doorn nodded slowly, and saw his words bring a last smile to the renegade's lips. "I believe you, Bodey," he said softly. "Yes, I believe you. There'll be lots of us makin' a fresh start in Oregon."

The hand at his elbow belonged to Marita Kane. Doorn looked at the girl standing straight and proud beside him, and her very presence was a promise that she would be waiting for him in that cabin on the Willamette at the end of a good day to come.





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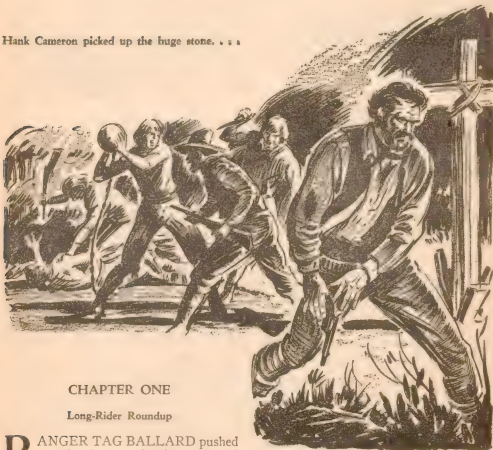
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THE DEVIL'S CLAW

Dramatic Novelette of a Ranger's Mystery Trail

By R. S. LERCH

Hank Cameron picked up the huge stone. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

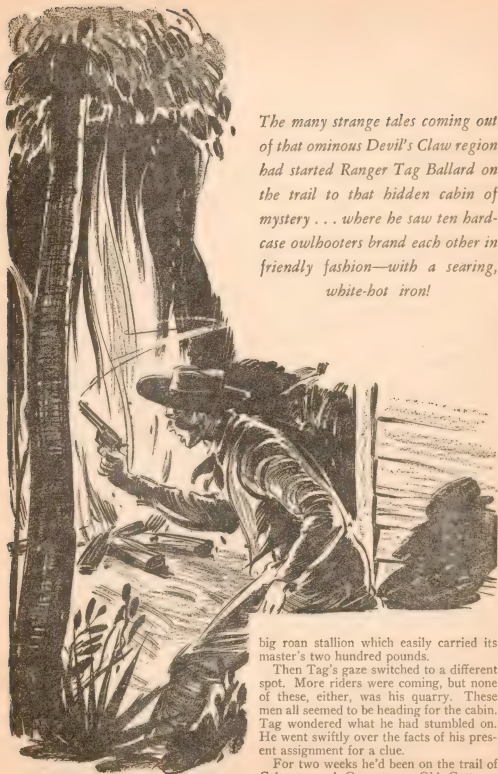
Long-Rider Roundup

RANGER TAG BALLARD pushed up the slope cautiously and halted at the crest just inside the last clump of bushes. There was a valley ahead and he wasn't sure he'd completely lost Oxenstern's trail. The big blond killer might be just ahead. He would be watching his back trail. Tag leaned forward in the saddle to press aside the bushes for a clearer view.

The valley was narrow and open. Against the opposite slope, almost across from him, the last glow of the sunken sun was reflected redly from the window of an

old cabin. There was no smoke coming from the rusted stovepipe and the place looked long deserted. The ranger's quick-roving glance switched immediately to a source of movement up the valley. A rider was coming.

Even at a distance Tag knew it was not Oxenstern. This rider was small, his pony light and fast. Oxenstern's mount was a



The many strange tales coming out of that ominous Devil's Claw region had started Ranger Tag Ballard on the trail to that hidden cabin of mystery . . . where he saw ten hard-case owlhooters brand each other in friendly fashion—with a searing, white-hot iron!

big roan stallion which easily carried its master's two hundred pounds.

Then Tag's gaze switched to a different spot. More riders were coming, but none of these, either, was his quarry. These men all seemed to be heading for the cabin. Tag wondered what he had stumbled on. He went swiftly over the facts of his present assignment for a clue.

For two weeks he'd been on the trail of Coleman and Oxenstern. Old Gatty, a

well-known and respected mining engineer, had traveled south with them months before, and they had reappeared without him. The State wanted to know why.

Tag had found Coleman with a bullet in the back of his head, put there by Oxenstern. And now, in this southern section of Arizona, somewhere south of Mustang Mountain, Tag had lost Oxenstern's trail, at least temporarily. The fact that this survivor, known to be a treacherous killer, had murdered his own partner, now lent color to the rumor that Gatty had been likewise disposed of somewhere deep in the Sierra Madres.

But Tag could see nothing in all this to connect Coleman and Oxenstern with the gathering of these long-riders in the valley below. More men appeared as the first ones arrived and ground-tied their horses before the cabin. Already there were eight who had apparently come out of lairs in the back country. As the short twilight deepened to darkness two more came riding up from the eastern end of the valley.

Tag studied these last two as carefully as possible in the almost concealing gloom. One was so small that he appeared to be a child. But it was his companion who drew Tag's concentrated attention. This man was as big as Oxenstern and he rode a big mount. Tag could not tell whether the horse was a roan or not, nor could he be sure that the man wasn't Oxenstern. In fact, he was all but certain this man *was* the killer he was trailing.

The pair rode up to the group before the cabin, dismounted, and led the way inside. A moment later smoke began to drift up from the stovepipe. Tag's gaze moved to the western reaches of the valley and settled on a low swell a half mile away. He could cross the valley behind that and work along the opposite slope. If there was a window on the southern side of the cabin he would be able to see inside, from up the slope, without exposing himself close to it. He backed his mount deeper into the brush, then turned westward along the wooded hog-back that formed the valley's southern wall.

He left his horse in the scrub oaks at the top of the southern ridge, moved on foot toward his objective. The night breeze cooled his face as he advanced. The horses before the cabin door did not catch his

scent or show uneasiness to betray him.

There were sparks mingling with the cabin chimney smoke and Tag wondered why this gang required so hot a fire to cook a meal on a warm summer's night. Why didn't they cook in the open instead of heating up the cabin? He was directly above the building now. There was a window in the south wall. He began to ease down the slope.

The floor of the single room, near the window, came into view. Gradually, as Tag crept lower, more of the interior became visible in the glow of a lantern hanging from one of the rafters. Directly in front of the window and on a level with the sill, yet some twenty yards away from it, he crouched behind a clump of dogwood while he stared at the tableau within the cabin.



ALTOGETHER there were ten men in the room. All of them suggested the outlaw-trail. Lean, slit-eyed, angular-featured killers, there were two who, by their dissimilarity, dominated Tag Ballard's attention.

The first was the huge man who had ridden in last. He was not, Tag saw now, Oxenstern. This man was all that Oxenstern professed to be, more than Oxenstern could ever hope to be. Even though Tag was beyond sound of the man's voice and out of the immediate presence of his influence, he nevertheless felt the pull, the power, the incredible magnetism of the man.

The big fellow's hair was gray and his broad jaw was hidden, though not softened, by an iron-gray, spade-shaped beard that hung half-way down his chest. The piercing intensity of his bright blue eyes set Tag searching his memory for identification. Though he'd never seen this giant before, Tag felt that he should recognize him by reputation.

It was the man's companion who furnished the clue, the little fellow Tag had thought was a child. Tag now saw he was a dwarf, with the shoulders of a man, the legs of a doll and a head as big as his master's.

This dwarf threw out his own personality almost as strongly as did the big man.

That personality expressed nothing softer than a malignant, vicious cruelty. The little fellow was stoking the fire in the stove and now and then thrusting an iron rod deeper into the coals. His task seemed to please him for his loose lips were stretched in a perpetual grin.

"Silvertip Schmitt and Cottonmouth," Tag whispered to himself suddenly.

Schmitt, he recalled quickly, never traveled without his evil little companion. Cottonmouth would not have lived twenty-four hours away from the massive Schmitt. There were too many who hated him.

Schmitt had never before been this far south, Tag thought. He had been a hard-rock miner but his greatest notoriety derived from the fact that he was the suspected organizer and head of the infamous Red Shirts, a miners' secret lodge whose purpose appeared to have been blackmail and intimidation more than of struggle for higher wages and betterment of conditions for fellow toilers. The lodge had been broken up some six months ago.

Tag's attention now centered on Silvertip and the other two at the table. The two facing Schmitt were known killers. Though they were not yet wanted in Arizona, Tag had a hunch it wouldn't be long before they would be. The lanky man with a profile like a badly nicked axe blade was Ace Hendryx. The short, stocky one with equally angular features was his partner, Deuce Blaine. They were bending over the table, looking down at what was apparently a map. Silvertip appeared to be talking and his thick, hairy forefinger traced a course over the map's surface.

Suddenly the dwarf, Cottonmouth, turned and said something. Silvertip straightened, folded the map, thrust it into a pocket. Then he evidently gave an order. The men lined up in single-file behind Ace and Deuce. There was an uneasy shifting among them and some looked nervously around as if dreading what was to come, yet not daring to protest or back out. Their attitudes indicated that some sort of ordeal was imminent.

Ace Hendryx bared a lean, muscular forearm and thrust it out toward Silvertip. The big man grasped the wrist and his fierce eyes beneath their shaggy brows seemed to bore into the hawklike face of the gunman.

Cottonmouth was advancing with a branding iron whose curled tip glowed red. Ace never moved a muscle nor gave a sound that Tag could hear when the smoke of his own scorched flesh ascended to his nostrils.



SILVERTIP released Ace's hand and gripped Deuce's wrist as the little man stepped forward. One after another they followed, but not all of them had the nerveless fortitude of Ace and Deuce. Some winced, one or two swore shrilly, but none hesitated about advancing and thrusting out his arm. Silvertip watched each of them closely, and Tag knew this was not only a seal of fealty but, more particularly, a test of raw, hard nerve.

At last the final man had received his brand and stepped back. Then Silvertip took the rod and motioned the dwarf to step forward. Cottonmouth's eyes dilated with horror. He shrank away and started to dash for the door. Ace Hendryx shot out a long arm and caught him by the shoulder, whirled him back. The dwarf sank to the floor, groveling at the feet of Silvertip Schmitt.

The big man's face, in its revelation of black anger, was terrible to look at. He thrust the branding iron into the fire, reached down and jerked Cottonmouth to the top of the table. With one savage yank he ripped the dwarf's sleeve to the shoulder. Holding his squirming prisoner with one huge hand he picked up the rod and pressed the red end against the arm, holding it there a full second longer than he had allowed the dwarf to hold it on the others.

Cottonmouth suddenly stopped struggling. He had endured all the torture he could absorb before the iron had ever touched his flesh. He had fainted. When Silvertip finally thrust the iron back into the fire Tag saw a livid S standing out against the white flesh.

Cottonmouth opened his eyes while Schmitt was again taking the iron from the fire. This time the big man bared his own muscular forearm. He pressed the iron against the flesh, just above the wrist, and held it there for a full three seconds.

Then he ripped open his shirt, exposing an arching, hair-matted chest. Once more he applied the iron. Smoke from the burning hair almost concealing his massive head. Finished, he hurled the iron to the floor and roared out an order. Cottonmouth stood up on the table, lifted down and extinguished the lantern, secured the iron as the others filed leisurely out to their horses.

With Silvertip Schmitt at their head, and Ace and Deuce riding just behind him, the band headed westward toward the upper end of the valley. Tag watched them go, held motionless for a little in the spell of what he had witnessed.

Suddenly he wished big Hank Cameron, the nerry, quick-thinking deputy he had once worked with, was with him. Together they might have braced this gang in the cabin and got an explanation. To have tried it alone, Tag knew, would have been pure suicide.

He descended to the cabin to look around. By the light of a match he discovered nothing save the dying coals of the fire in the battered stove. He returned thoughtfully to his horse, headed eastward in the same direction his quarry, Oxenstern, had been taking when the trail had been lost.

Two days later, with only an abandoned camp-site to suggest that his man still headed east, Tag came to a small valley that was an off-shoot of the wide rangeland beyond. Here a nester had started a small ranch. As Tag rode up he saw the man was digging at the edge of a grove of aspens. Beside the hole was a long, canvas-covered bundle, its shape grimly suggestive. The man straightened as Tag hailed him.

"Burying your dead?" Tag asked calmly, as he rode up.

The nester flushed. "I'm burying somebody's dead, and he don't look pretty, mister. Seems to me you're mighty curious," he finished with some heat.

"Curiosity's my business." Tag turned out the left side of his vest, exposing his badge of authority. "Suppose you go on talking," he suggested.

The man met Tag's searching gaze squarely. "Good enough. I'm glad you've come. I was going to report anyway, soon as I'd finished this job. Last night

this big blond came staggering in here just about like he is now. His horse was all in. I reckon no horse other than that roan stallion could've come through at all."

"Roan stallion?" Tag cried, sensing the end of his trail. He swung from the saddle as the man turned back the canvas cover.

It was Oxenstern all right, but scarcely recognizable. He'd been worked over with a knife. The fight he'd put up showed where skin had been worn away from his wrists when his powerful muscles had strained against the ropes binding them. Tag immediately thought of the scene in the cabin, and of—Cottonmouth. Tag knew immediately that he had the answer. Squarely in the center of the blond outlaw's forehead was the unhealed S brand.

"I reckoned he was left for dead," the nester was saying. "Afterward he come to, got his horse out of wherever he had it hid, and headed this way. He just naturally bled to death, I figure. He was dead two minutes after he slid off the roan's back, but he had time enough to mumble a few words."

When the man had re-covered the grisly cadaver Tag said,

"Go on."

"Well, near as I could make out his mumbling, he said, 'That silverhaired devil did this—but it was a little fiend from hell—with the knife . . . I played dead—then got to—my hoss—back in th' pocket—and rid here . . . now they know—where my partner's and my—' . . . and right there he died. I never did learn what his secret was, nor I ain't seen any partner, if there ever was one," the nester finished.

"There was one," Tag answered. "I buried him a couple of weeks ago. Oxenstern had killed him. Reckon he wanted that secret all to himself. But now there's ten others who know it—and I ain't one of them."

CHAPTER TWO

Trail to Hell

TAG BALLARD faced the Adjutant General on the other side of the desk. For two months he had conducted a ceaseless, one-man search for

Silvertip Schmitt and his outfit. But he had neither come across their trail nor even heard of them. At times he had almost doubted that the gruesome rites had ever taken place in that cabin—or that Silvertip Schmitt had been responsible for Oxenstern's death. Then came the message ordering him to report at the state capitol.

Tag waited patiently while the adjutant general studied him with sharp eyes. "Ballard, do you remember the case of Coleman and Oxenstern and Gatty?"

Tag nodded. "Very well."

The general looked down at a sheet of paper. "I have a letter here from Colonel Estudo Vegas, head of the western branch of the Mexican Secret Service, asking the loan of a ranger who fears neither man, beast, nor devil, and suggesting your name. He doesn't know what there is, exactly, to investigate, but five rurales and one American—the latter working directly under him—tried—and disappeared completely."

Tag frowned. "How does that fit in with the pair I trailed and found dead? Tell me that."

The general picked up another paper, scanned it swiftly. "I have here your full report," he said, then looked up at Tag, at the same time gesturing toward the Mexican officer's written request. "One of the rurales was found, murdered. In the center of his forehead had been branded the letter S."

Tag stiffened in his chair. "I'll take the job, sir," he said quietly.

The stern face of the gray-haired man watching him broke into a brief smile. He arose and held out his hand. "Good! Then let me have your badge and just sign this resignation. You know, of course, that you cannot cross the international line in your official capacity. I won't need to add that a new commission, with a command of your own, will be awaiting your

successful return. That is your reward!"

When these formalities were over the general gave last instructions.

"I will write Colonel Vegas that you will be at the *Cantina del Torro* in Bacuachi, as he suggests, on the evening of the twenty-second. You will not know him, but he will make himself known to you. And now, lad, may God's luck be adobe *Cantina del Torro* when Tag walked

There was emotion in the stern officer's voice as he shook Tag's hand. The ex-ranger flushed a little with pleasure and said, "Thank you, Sir."

* * *

There was but one customer in the little adobe *Cantina del Torro* when Tag walked in and took a seat at a cigarette-burned table. He ordered aguardiente, then sat and stared morosely into the glass without drinking. To all appearances he was a wandering saddle-tramp, with battered Stetson, scuffed half-boots, and patched shirt and levis. Only his sixgun and its accompanying cartridge belt and holster, were oiled and in first class condition.

He was conscious of the sharp regard of the peon at the table in the corner but did not give any sign of awareness. Finally the man got up and walked to the short bar at the back of the room. He said something to the owner, disappeared through a door at the end of the bar. The proprietor approached Tag, hesitated, then murmured,

"It is requested that the *señor* wait two minutes, then enter the private room behind the counter."

"*Bueno!*" Tag raised and drank half the whiskey.

A little later he drank the balance and after another pause sauntered toward the door through which had passed the man dressed like a peon.

The peon had papers, several photo-

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graphs, and a map spread on the table before him. He looked up with a brief smile as Tag entered. Tag whispered, "Colonel Estudo Vegas?"



THE officer gave a quick nod and his reply was equally low-voiced. "But just plain Manueto tonight, *Señor* Ballard. I knew you at once. Your general sent me a photograph. Please be seated and we will conclude our business so that no time may be lost. Too much has already passed without results."

He swept the papers before him into a pile and turned them over as the little proprietor entered with a tall bottle of *vino* and two glasses. He served silently, then left the room. When he had gone the little Mexican again spread his papers and looked up at Tag. He said, in perfect English and with scarcely a trace of an accent,

"*Señor* Ballard, your chief gave you almost as much information as I myself have. There are but a few details to add."

He turned the map of the State of Sonora around and pointed with a match to a section encircled in red ink.

"Somewhere in here, east of Curcurpe and west of Arispe, is your objective. Just what that objective is I do not know. I have ideas, naturally, but if they are wrong they will be of no help, but rather a hindrance to you. If they are correct you will learn them for yourself. Enough to say that something sinister is in there, some place deep in the almost unexplored fastnesses of the Sierra Madres—something that gobbles up peons and our finest *rurales* alike.

"Some fifty peons are known to have been lured there, to disappear utterly. How many more of whom we know nothing we can not even guess. One of the *rurales* stumbled onto this fact and worked out the beginnings of several faint trails. He sent in this map to his officer, stated he was going to run the matter down. The next time he was seen he was lying in the center of the trail, shot through the heart, and a letter S was burned in his forehead.

"At intervals four others took these trails and never reported again. We can only hope that they are still alive—or it

may be they would be better off dead. Who can tell? The matter then came to my attention, and a native of your own country, a reckless young devil, asked permission to follow those evil trails to the end. He also mentioned your name as one to come after him if he did not reappear. Permission was given and he worked directly under me. That was a month ago. *Señor* Hank Cameron has not been seen since."

Tag Ballard suddenly leaned forward, eyes narrowed. He straightened slowly. "I knew him," he said quietly. "He was a deputy sheriff up north, and once worked with me in breaking up a gang of road-agents. He is a good man. He saved my life. I'd go in there now for no other reason in the world than to pay back that debt."

Again the Mexican smiled. "I thought *Señor* Cameron had recommended the right man. Now I am sure of it. . . . The four *rurales* who are still alive, so far as we know, are: Pablo Mendion, Toma Miramontez, Aristeo Romero, and Feliciano Campos. Here are their pictures. Study them well so that you may recognize any whom you see. The irregular red lines on the map indicate the beginnings and several miles of each of the trails our first officer worked out. You will probably want to start your investigation along one of those trails. You can decide which, later.

"Finally, have you any very secret place you can keep this? It is the proof that you are working directly under me and have full authority to act as you deem wise. It was cast especially for such work as this. Its recognition by an enemy would, of a certainty, not only bring failure but probably death, and before death—who can say what unbearable torture might be in store?"

He held up a small flat disc with the eagle of Mexico stamped on one side and on the other the Spanish for, "Special Agent under the officer commanding the Secret Police." In the center was a number which Tag knew would be his identification.

Tag took the disc and removed one of his boots. There was an old cut in the instep next to the heel. He inserted a fingernail in this and lifted a flap of

leather that worked on a flat spring. A small pocket was exposed. Inserting the disc, he let the leather snap back into place, closing the pocket.

For some minutes Tag applied himself to the task before him and most of that time was spent in studying the faces of the four rurales who had disappeared. When he finally looked up he knew he would recognize any one of them, even should he not see that man for several years. The meager details of the map had been etched in his mind after but a brief examination.

"I reckon I better head west tonight," he said.

Colonel Estudio Vegas arose. "You are a strange man," he said, smiling slightly. "Not once have you requested information about pay for this dangerous task. I can assure you, however, that even should you fail you will have no cause to complain. Should you succeed, if you find what I suspect is back in there, you may never have to work again."

"I'm going in there as much as anything to pay back a debt to an old friend," Tag said flatly.

"*Vaya con Dios, amigo mio,*" Estudio Vegas said softly. He held the rear door of the cantino open for Tag Ballard to pass into the night.

For two weeks Tag Ballard worked westward, leisurely, continuing his role of saddle-bum. On his way he visited a number of small villages and in most of them picked up scraps of vague information. What impressed Tag was not so much the fact that Pedro in one, or Juan, or Jose, or Luis, or Salvador in others, had disappeared westward, as it was the hushed and superstitious fear that these disappearances seemed to have engendered among the people.

As the villages were left behind and the fastnesses of the Sierras was reached, Tag worked out the beginnings of the faint trails marked on the map—and they were faint, no more than suggestions that one or more had passed that way, in some cases no more than the charred wood-ends of long dead fires. The northernmost of these trails appeared to be the one most recently used and he decided to follow that.

Gradually the terrain grew rougher, wilder. For days no domestic animal or

human being was seen. High, rugged, snow-capped peaks arose on all sides. The trail led along sharp, narrow valleys with steep, wooded slopes, or along rock-walled gorges that towered a thousand feet in the air and whose floors were in perpetual gloom.

Through it all Tag held to the dim trail and grew increasingly cautious. Had there been more than an occasional scrape of a shod hoof on rock, an old foot-print in some bed of sand, or the few cinders of an abandoned fire to guide him, he would have traveled only at night. There were times, at valley or canyon intersections, when it took hours of intensive study to discover into which opening his quarry had passed.

As near as he could guess, this late afternoon, he was well within the red circle indicated on the map of Colonel Estudio Vegas when he rode out of a canyon and entered a narrow valley whose floor was dotted with boulders, clumps of birch and oak, and watered by an ice-cold mountain stream.

As was his habit before exposing himself in the more open valley he sat his horse motionlessly while he studied the lay of the land ahead, examined every clump of trees or brush, every boulder or wind-fall for a possible look-out posted to watch the trails into the unknown lair he sought.

It was at this instant, when he was about to ride into the open, that his quick and distance-trained eyes caught a suggestion of movement far up the valley where the trunks of a small grove of paper birch made a white splash against the dark valley wall. He waited, gaze centered on the spot. The motion of a dark object against the white background reappeared, became constant, then resolved itself into a man who had come through the grove and was staggering along the open valley.

There was something about this man, his manner of progress, that spurred Tag into swift and immediate action. He touched spurs to his mount, raced forward. Even as his horse got into stride he saw the man fall, heave slowly to his feet again, and surge forward a dozen more paces.

Again and again he fell and fought his way up and kept coming. The third time, his desperate effort to arise produced no more than a brief straightening of his

arms with his palms pressed against the ground, the half arching of his torso, and immediate collapse.



TAG swung from the saddle while his horse was still in motion and ran the last few yards to kneel beside the man. He was an Indian, but whether Yaqui or Papago, Tag could not be sure. He was naked to the waist, and his brown skin exhibited that which told Tag it could not now be far to his objective. The marks of Cottonmouth were carried by this dying native.

All over his torso were networks of blood-clotted wounds. Unlike the body of Oxenstern, this torture had not been administered by a knife but by some devilish weapon of the warped little dwarf's own invention. Blood had oozed from half-inch holes where the flesh had been literally gouged out. The holes were equidistant along each line, and Tag suspected the torture implement had been a lash with bits of sharp iron fastened to it at regular intervals.

Gently he turned the man over on his back. Pain-dulled eyes stared up at him from the flat face of the native. But it was not at the man's eyes that Tag stared. Squarely in the center of the Indian's forehead was the S brand. This one was old, healed, and formed a white scar against the brown skin. The Indian was trying to say something. Tag switched his attention to the man's eyes and lips.

Tag said sharply, "Wait," and ran to his saddle pocket. He returned with a pint of whiskey. Raising the Indian's head, he pressed the mouth of the bottle to his lips. The fiery liquid brought a glow of appreciation and intelligence to the dull eyes. The Indian gasped, gripped Tag's arm. Tag noted that the man's wrist was raw where things had recently bound it. Straining to make his words intelligible, the Indian began to talk. His hand gestured westward as he urged,

"*Cuidada! Uña del Diabolo*—" A hole appeared in the Indian's back, just above Tag's supporting arm, and his words suddenly ceased.

With a long, convulsive leap, Tag was on his way toward cover before the sound

of the rifle shot reached him. Crouched behind a boulder, his gaze searched the wooded northern slopes of the valley. There were no more shots. Nothing up there moved. Yet, entering the victim's back, the lead could only have come from that direction. Tag was positive he had made no mistake on that count.

For two hours Tag remained in concealment, alert for any movement, any sound, from any direction. His horse contentedly munched the grass along the edge of a stream nearby, gave no warning of anyone's approach, did not act the least bit skittish.

But that rifleman had been too accurate at too great a distance for Tag to expose himself. He thought, wryly, that the marksman must realize now that he had chosen the wrong target. Had he killed Tag instead, the Indian in his broken condition would have proved easy prey, a little later.

The sun sank the last few yards to the rugged horizon, disappeared, and twilight deepened to the blackness of a night without moon. There was only the faint light of brilliant stars overhead. Only then did Tag cautiously leave shelter and move to his horse.

When he mounted, Tag did not continue up the valley. He was riding into no ambush if he could help it. There had been a branch canyon some five miles back. He didn't know where it lead, but it headed south and somewhere to the south was another trail winding westward into the vultures' nest he sought. He rode steadily on.

The Indian had gestured to the west and his warning, "Beware! The Devil's Claw," became a constant, sinister refrain in Tag Bullard's mind as his mount picked its way through the night. Then, suddenly, the horse pricked up its ears, turned its head a little to the right where the gloom was blackest. Tag knew the answer to that.

The killer had accurately foreseen Tag's next move and, while Tag was hidden, had circled and awaited along his back trail. Somewhere in the dark at the foot of the canyon wall, the killer was already lining his gun muzzle on the black outline of Tag Bullard. He was taking careful, deadly aim.

CHAPTER THREE

Renegades' Slave Gong

BUT with the first movement of his mount's head, as the animal's ears were in the act of advertising the presence of the enemy, Tag was on his way out of the saddle in a long dive.

A gun-muzzle blossomed a flower of red fire against the blackness of the canyon wall even as he dove. Tag lit, rolled, and squirmed around to face the danger, his six-gun in hand. He drove a single shot into the dark and rolled again, nearer to a cuplike depression in the rocky floor. Again there was a quick spurt of return fire.

Tag drove in three shots fast as he could flip the hammer, his lead driving straight at the orange spot almost before it had winked out.

Tag didn't move, except to extract the four empties and punch fresh cartridges into the cylinder. A low groan that was too expressive of pain to be a ruse sounded across the narrow canyon. Tag got to his feet, moved forward cautiously.

He saw the gun first, glinting dully in the starlight. There was no hand near it. But his caution was not relaxed. He took another short step. Then something moved and Tag's thumb slid the hammer back to full cock. Again the groan, fainter, weaker this time. Another step, and he saw the huddled form on the ground, both hands pressed against the breast. He was a small man, Tag could see.

Still holding his gun muzzle on the man, Tag fished a match from a vest pocket, held it at arm's length, and thumbed the head. Almost immediately he lowered the hammer and slid his gun into its leather while he stepped forward and knelt beside the dying outlaw.

In the feeble light of the flame the torture-twisted features of Deuce Blaine, the second man to take the brand in the old cabin the night that now seemed to have been on some other planet in some other life.

Blaine's eyes were clouded with pain as he stared up into the features of the man whom he had tried to kill. The eyes cleared slightly. Words came in gasps while a bloody froth formed on Blaine's

lips. Tag could barely understand him as he said:

"You're that ranger—Ballard, eh? A greaser rode in three days ago—said you was huntin' us. Well—you're heading—into hell. They're waitin' for you—and Heaven help you. . . . The Devil's Claw—won't. Silvertip—" The bloody froth became gouts of crimson welling up from punctured and collapsing lungs.

The match burned Tag's fingers. He dropped it and stood up. For a moment he looked down at the body he could barely distinguish against the black background.

"I did have the right hunch, after all," he mused. "They are waiting up ahead, and this *segundo* slid around back here to kill me or head me back into that hell he mentioned. Reckon we won't let the trap close just yet."

The cross canyon into which Tag turned, opened into a second east-and-west valley scarcely a half mile to the south. Here, a little way from the opening, sheltered by a heavy growth of ancient scrub cedars, Tag tethered his own and Blaine's horse, ate a cold meal and stretched out for a few hours of sleep. He had a hunch that when he moved again he'd need all his nerve, alertness, and endurance to survive.

The sun was high when he awoke. The two horses contentedly munched the scanty clumps of grass within reach of their tethers. Despite the fact that there was no sign of anyone in the vicinity, Tag did not risk a fire. He ate his last cans of cold beans and tomatoes for breakfast. Saddling the two horses, he mounted his own and with the dead Deuce's horse following, rode out into the open valley.

Almost at once he saw signs. More than one rider had made the faint trail that wound westward up the valley. The second of the three trails outlined on the rurale's map—and only a half mile from the one he had left. That meant they were converging, that the end, the point where all the trails met, was now very close. Tag immediately turned to the north slope of the valley where clumps of trees would give him some cover and from then on he never left shelter until he had carefully surveyed the ground ahead for some sign of a lookout.

HIS progress was slow. The floor of the valley began a gradual ascent until, at the top of the rise, it formed a pass between two mountains, with one slope of a third peak just visible through the gap beyond. High on that partially seen peak ahead Tag could see a single ribbon of snow winding downward.

His caution increased. If there was a look-out he would be posted somewhere above the pass. Most of the time Tag kept to cover so dense, and so far up the slope of the northern mountain, that he could not see the pass.

When he finally did catch a glimpse of it below him he discovered that he was opposite its crest. He then began to work cautiously down to it. Nowhere, on either his side of the pass or on the southern slope, could he detect a watcher. And then he reached the pass, looked ahead and forgot the possible presence of enemies.

The view beyond and above the level of the pass held him motionless for a full minute. The ribbon of snow had been multiplied by five; five bands of snow extending down from a rounded, white snow-cap like the palm of a hand, and each curving toward the tip like half-curved fingers. The Devil's Claw!

What was it the dying outlaw had said? "Heaven help you! The Devil's Claw won't."

It hadn't made sense then. It did so now. His gaze slipped down the mountain slope toward the valley below. He could not see the bottom but there seemed to be activity at one point up the slope, where little ant-like men with what appeared to be burros moved down the mountainside and out of sight toward the valley. Down there, hidden from him, was the end of the trail.

Tag was sure of it and the thought brought a queer coldness, as of a chill warning of more deadly danger than he had ever before encountered in his adventurous life.

His gaze moved once more to the slope he had just left, saw that its curve, west and north, would bring him to a barely discernible shoulder from which it was probable he could look directly down on his objective. He took to the slope again, still moving under cover.

So slowly and cautiously had he traveled throughout the day that he now noted with surprise that the afternoon was far advanced. He feared that he would not reach the shoulder before it might be too dark to examine the scene below. But it was just ahead and as the cover below him was so dense that he could see nothing and would himself be well hid, he took a chance and rode more swiftly. He was in a stand of tall, thick spruce. Trees grew to the very edge of the shoulder. He dismounted when he could see open ground ahead, tied the reins of the two horses to overhead branches and slowly eased into the open on foot.

What had looked like a hump of the mountain proved to be a bare shelf of outcropping rock, with the tips of the tallest trees far below him. Tag looked down into the valley. Once more he was held in startled wonder at the strange scene he witnessed.

It was not a town, for there were too few buildings, but there were enough swarming inhabitants to form a town. Nor was it a camp, for there were no long bunkhouses, barns, or cook-camp. Yet there was ceaseless activity among what Tag estimated must be close to seventy-five men. In order to make some sense out of the picture he shifted his gaze to the southern end of the place and examined each group of men and each structure as his glance swept northward toward the opposite end.

To the south was a stockade of peeled logs, pointed at the top and over ten feet in height. On the top of each corner of this stockade was a tiny cabin, like a miniature blockhouse. Facing the rest of the camp, in the center of the north stockade wall, were double doors of logs. They were open and the interior of the rectangle was empty.

Not ten rods from this structure five men were spotted near a huge pile of rocks. They were swinging hammers, or using sledges on the large pieces. Others pounded smaller chunks into powder. Each, Tag saw when one of them moved, had a chain and ball fastened tightly to one ankle.

At one side of them stood two men with rifles.

A line of men leading pack burros



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slowly moved up and each added his own beast's burden to the rock pile. Other men carried the finely crushed rock away. They carried it to the banks of a stream at a spot where four log cabins formed a square. Here they dumped the rock dust into boxes while other men poured buckets of water over it. Here, also, were men with rifles.

Above the cluster of cabins Tag saw the line of men with their burros emerging from a hole in the side of Devil's Claw Mountain. They plodded down a trail leading to the rock pile beside the stockade. Just below and to one side of the tunnel opening, out of which the men and pack animals came and into which they returned, Tag noted another hole. Nothing moved to or from this spot. He believed it was merely an abandoned drift.

The scene made sense to him now, all but the stockade. This was old Gatty's discovery. His two partners, Coleman and Oxenstern, had killed him to have it for themselves. Then Oxenstern had murdered Coleman that he might not have to share it with even one partner, and Silvertip Schmitt, placing credit in the wild rumors of Coleman's and Oxenstern's fabulous discovery, had murdered the surviving partner after torturing him to learn the location of the spot.

Then, with his obsession for organizing, Silvertip had gathered and sworn in his gang of killers and they had moved south, impressing peons and Indians into slave labor at the mine. No machinery, no concentrating or crushing plant. The mine was rich enough to use crude methods. Labor was cheap when all that was paid for it was the price of scanty rations. And that slave labor dug out the ore, hammered it fine, and washed out the grains of gold in clumsy sluice boxes.

While Tag watched, day ended and the short, mountain twilight began. Labor at the mine ceased. The movements of the men took on different directions. The slaves at the sluice boxes and those in the mine tunnel were herded into the stockade while their burros were put out to graze with saddle horses on a grassy level south of the stockade. Guards mounted to the little sentry boxes at the corners of the stockade. Inside the log walls tiny cooking fires of the slaves began to wink.

But these activities received only cursory attention from Tag Ballard. He was watching the five men who had been wielding the sledges and hammers. There were two armed guards escorting them. They moved in the opposite direction from the slaves leaving the tunnel.

Four of them appeared to be small men, humped over, moving slowly, each carrying his heavy iron ball in his hands. The fifth was a taller man. He walked upright, the weight of the ball appearing to be but a slight strain on his movements. Tag noted that the guards kept a little away from him, out of arm's reach.

Suddenly Tag understood. The four smaller men were the four remaining Rurales who had come to investigate. The other was his old friend, the ex-deputy, Hank Cameron.

Tag grinned thinly as he realized why those guards kept out of Cameron's reach, chained though he was. If the white captive had got one of his big hands on the neck of one of the outlaws he would have snapped a spine before lead could kill him.

These five moved slowly up toward the mine drift, and Tag began to sense the reason for this move. These men were dangerous. They were men of courage and men who might put courage into the broken slaves within the stockade if they were permitted to associate with them. Therefore they worked alone at the hardest labor the crude mining methods afforded and lived alone under extra special guard.

But it was not to the mine drift that they went. They turned aside and entered the second hole, below the drift. The guards did not go in. One of them turned to what Tag had failed to notice in his first brief examination of the spot—a huge log door. The guard swung it shut and laid across it what appeared to be a heavy wooden bar. One of the guards moved back toward the cabins—the other sat down on a boulder a little distance from the cave door.

While the ex-ranger's eyes, trained to distance, made out a few of these details, he guessed at the others. The distance was too great to recognize any individuals among the guards. More men than he had seen at the organization of the band back in the States were present, though,

he was sure. Also, he could see none who might be the dwarf, Cottonmouth, or his big master, Silvertip Schmitt. But he could not be sure of Silvertip's absence. There were big men among the guards.

With the dying of twilight, now, and the deepening of the gloom of night, Tag began to work his way on foot, angling southward down the slope so that he might cross the valley below the remuda and work up into the enemy camp on the same side of the valley as the imprisoned lawmen.

As he moved, he knew that the next rising of the sun would look down on him still a free man, with the hell-hole below cleaned out—or he wouldn't see that sun rise. He did not intend to become a branded slave.

CHAPTER FOUR

Valley of Doom

TAG circled the remuda and reached the far side of the narrow valley almost opposite the stockade. He began to work up the slope a little for a better view of the camp and the valley wall he had just left.

A quarter of a mile to the north of the camp there seemed to be a deep draw formed by a ridge and the side of the mountain. It entered the valley from the east, seemed to turn abruptly northward around the lower mountain slope.

Suddenly, close to the four cabins and coming down from the north, Tag caught a glimpse of a pair of riders. Their movements, as they rode out into the valley, caught for an instant against a background grayer than themselves, registered a subconscious warning to Tag. One look at this pair and he knew that the draw was the end of the northern trail down which he had been originally riding. He also knew that Silvertip Schmitt and Cottonmouth had gone out to attend to him when he rode along that trail.

A roared and angry order from Silvertip likewise suggested to Tag that the big man had found the bodies of the Indian and his own *segundo*, and had read sign on what had happened. A dozen men boiled out of the cabins at the call.

As they reached the big leader Tag

could hear him giving harsh commands. He eased farther up the slope, closer to the mouth of the sealed cave, and crouched under better cover while he waited to learn what the leader's orders had been.

Almost immediately the men left their chief, divided into groups to carry out the orders. Nine of them hurried to the stockade and three moved up the trail toward the cave. Tag cursed beneath his breath at this. His first plan was to have catfooted up there, knife the guard, and release the *rurales* and Hank Cameron. Now that was impossible.

Soon those who had entered the stockade came out guarding a score of slaves. Some of the slaves carried lanterns. The guards herded them down valley to a stand of timber.

Shortly after they had disappeared the sound of axes drifted back to Tag. Within a quarter hour they reappeared, each man shouldering a log of dead wood. These were deposited at one side of the square formed by the four cabins. The slaves were immediately marched back for another load.

Other victims were brought from the stockade and set to work splitting this timber and piling it. One built a pyramid of lighter pieces. Once more slaves arrived carrying chunks of wood which they deposited on the big pile already accumulated. This time they were herded to one side of the square and were allowed to sit down. Some of them, already nearly exhausted by the heavy labor in the mine, fell down.

Then Tag heard sounds on the trail passing a short distance from his spot of concealment. The three who had ascended to the cave, together with the guard at the entrance, were coming down. One of the armed guards was leading and the other three, with drawn six-guns, were following the five captured law officers.

The ex-ranger's fingers caressed the butt of his own six-gun as the group passed within fifty feet of his hiding place. By the faint starlight he caught a glimpse of their features, drawn and deepened by labor and privation. He half drew the gun when Big Hank Cameron turned his head and Tag saw the white, snakelike scar of the S branded on his forehead.

Then the prisoners were past, staggering under the weights that they carried. Tag noted, too, that these weights were not iron balls, but boulders with ring bolts fitted into them, to which the chains had been soldered.

Suddenly light sprang up near the pile of firewood. A huge bonfire threw its ruddy light over the listless and fatigue-numbed faces of the prisoners, and the lean, hard features of their outlaw masters. The shifting fire-glow likewise played constantly, redly, over a heavy wooden post erected in the center of the square.

Some inkling of what was about to take place passed through Tag Ballard's mind. He immediately began to ease down the slope and move closer to the square. This time his gun was in his hand.

When he had reached one of the cabins he eased along the wall, keeping the building between himself and the fire and hugging the deepest shadow. When he crouched in the tall grass beside the cabin wall he was not twenty feet from the edge of the square. While he had made his approach, preparations in the square had proceeded to their climax.



SILVERTIP SCHMITT and Cottonmouth stood beside the tall stake. Into Tag's line of vision two guards appeared with one of the slaves between them. Only careful study of the man's face permitted Tag to recognize the rurale Feliciano Campos. There was a wildness in the man's eyes that indicated he knew or suspected something of what he was about to endure.

Tag remembered the lacerated hide of the escaped Indian, looked closely at Cottonmouth to discover the nature of the whip that was about to be used. He discovered nothing. The dwarf held nothing in his hands.

Silvertip advanced a pace while the two guards held the rurale by the arms, facing the big, gray-whiskered leader. The big man thundered his denunciation in a voice that carried a mile.

"Campos, you inspired that Indian we whipped for trying to steal gold to play unconscious or dead so he'd be cut down

from the stake. You created the disturbance that switched the attention of all of us to you so that he could sneak away and head outside for help. But he didn't get far. Deuce Blaine followed and blasted him. But Deuce also lost his life to the man reported to be headed this way. So you're responsible for Deuce's death, too. And don't look for help from this ranger. Guards are now on their way to cover every entrance to this valley. He'll be brought in alive—and he'll get what you're going to get!"

Campos' face was lemon-colored. His eyes were glassy. His arms became suddenly paralyzed and the big stone he held slipped to the ground with a rattle of the chain to which it was attached.

Silvertip laughed. "Yes, Campos—it's the *devil's claw* you'll get. Tie him up."

At the command, regardless of the dragging stone at the end of the chain, and the iron band that all but broke his ankle, the two husky guards dragged the Mexican to the stake. His wrists were lashed to the ends of a transverse bar and his feet to the bottom of the stake. Then the guards moved out of Ballard's line of sight.

Silvertip stepped around to face the captive.

There was blood on the Mexican's lips where his teeth had cut through the skin in his fight to hold back wild supplication.

Silvertip stepped back and Cottonmouth came forward in short, mincing steps. The dwarf was dragging a box. He placed it in front of the captive, climbed up on it, and flexed his right arm. Something glinted briefly in the undulating glow of the fire, but Tag could not tell what it was.

"Get on with it," the huge leader ordered sharply.

Again Cottonmouth's weird cry rang out and with it his right hand flashed toward the captive's left wrist and slid down along the arm. Campos screamed—a thin sliver of sound. The flesh of the arm hung in ribbons and blood welled from five, arm-long incisions.

The scream jumped Tag's gun-hand into action. His first shot took Cottonmouth squarely between and above the eyes, where the dwarf had burned so

THE DEVIL'S CLAW

many brands into the flesh of helpless victims. With the shot, Tag slid along the cabin wall to the near corner. There was deathly silence for a moment, then Silver-tip let out a roar.

Guards charged into the open and Tag shot four more times, with scarcely a space between the shots. Two of the guards went down and a third gripped a broken gun-arm.

Tag shifted back along the wall and frantically swung out the cylinder and dumped his empty shells, with almost the same motion reaching for fresh cartridges from his belt loop.



BUT in the square a cataract of sound roared skyward. The burly Hank Cameron had picked up his stone in both hands when the guard's head turned at the sound of the first shot. That had been all the opportunity Cameron needed. The guard had his skull crushed, and then Cameron had the guard's gun.

In almost the same instant the white man's partners revealed why they belonged to one of the continent's most efficient law enforcement organizations. Cameron had shown them the way. One of them went down under a guard's gun and then the guard went down.

Cameron and the two remaining Rurales, rejuvenated now, hurried across the square toward Tag, their stones cradled in one arm, their free hands gripping the dead guards' guns.

As Hank Cameron and the Rurales made their desperate and all but hopeless bid for freedom and revenge an electric current seemed to run through the slaves. With one mass movement they were on their feet. The roar of their voices drowned the sound of gunfire. They surged ahead like a tidal wave, literally buried the guards.

Over on the side of the square opposite the slaves, Silvertip Schmitt let out a bull roar and two of his shots bored through the night. One of them nicked the ear of Tag Ballard as he thrust in the third cartridge. He snapped the cylinder shut,

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stepped into the open to face the massive slave-master. Each had three cartridges.

And as Tag moved, Schmitt's ace gunman, Ace Hendryx, came in from one side. Cameron was already half way across the clearing. He yelled, at the top of his voice,

"This way, Ace."

The lean gunman whirled. And then the roar of the slaves drowned all lesser sounds.

Tag didn't hear that roar. He heard nothing, saw nothing but the cold glare of the human grizzly bearing down on him. He realized the threat of Ace Hendryx had been turned aside. He knew, too, that Silvertip Schmitt would not be downed by one cone of lead, and that the gray-bearded man's gun-action was swift and deadly. Two shots into the dark at a target the man could not have seen, and a lead-nicked ear, told Tag all he needed to know about that.

Tag's muzzle flash almost blended with that of the outlaw's gun and his shot broke the big man's right arm. With scarcely a pause, continuing to plunge toward his slighted adversary, Silvertip whipped his left hand across and swept the gun from his useless right.

Tag fired again and saw the dust spurt from the big man's shirt front, breast high. Still Silvertip lunged ahead. The outlaw leader shot twice. Fire raked Tag's side. Silvertip tried a fourth shot and the hammer fell on an empty shell. He clubbed his gun and dove at Tag. Tag fired his last cartridge and saw a hole appear in the center of Silvertip's forehead, as if by magic.

The big man went down with his head scarcely an inch from Tag's feet. Tag drew a long, slow breath. Gradually the bedlam in the valley of horror intruded itself on his consciousness. He looked around, saw the insane work of the mob, the valiant efforts of Cameron and the two Rurales to bring the branded slaves under some kind of control.

Twenty feet away lay the body of Ace Hendryx, with half his lower jaw shot away and a bullet hole in the base of his skull. The raving slaves had not yet reached that guard's body. Tag pitched in

THE DEVIL'S CLAW

to help his brother officers. . . .

The mob had settled down at last. Half-starved, they were enjoying their first square meal in a month, taken from a small cave that served as storehouse and root-cellar. The Rurales, too, were preparing a good meal.

Hank Cameron and Tag Ballard walked toward the stake and Tag halted and looked down at what lay beside the remnants of a smashed box. The mass of battered flesh and bones, object of the insane rage of a mob of wild men, was scarcely recognizable as one having been a live human.

One hand, the right, was partially whole. Fitted into the palm, with a strap across the back of the hand to hold the instrument in place, was a broad metal band. From this, extending along the inner surface of each finger in a vicious curve, were bands of metal ending in needle-sharp points.

The ex-deputy sheriff said to Tag, "The devil's claw!"

Ballard nodded, raised his head toward the snow capped mountain with its snowy fingers curving downward. But from this angle Tag could not make out the claws he had seen from the crown of the pass. Instead the lines appeared to be faint, white paths leading to a central patch of white. Tag spoke aloud the fantastic thoughts of future promise that suddenly came to him.

"Like the trails converging on this valley, on a valley no longer to be washed with the blood of slaves, a white, clean valley from which will come the gold to help free the peon from want and the fear of want, and to educate him to choose wisely his own leaders who shall not be his masters but his servants."

When Tag Paused, Hank Cameron's drawing voice replied, "I reckon you're dreaming dreams and seein' vision, partner. But them things *could* come true, I suppose."

Still in the prophetic grip, born of the torture and misery he had witnessed, Tag replied with calm conviction.

"They can; they *will* come true—and in our lifetime."

THE END

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